

Imaginary Science and Cultural Signs:
Mapping Postcolonial Bangla (Bengali) Science Fiction

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To the memory of my mother, Maya Maiti and
To my father, Anup Maiti

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Abstract

Science Fiction (SF) is typically regarded as a Euro-American genre; only in recent decades have international readers and scholars become aware of SF from the postcolonial world. My dissertation addresses this literary-historical lacuna through a reading of select postcolonial Bangla SF texts (1945-2007) which are both popular and critically acclaimed within the Bengali cultural milieu.

I employ three board perspectives—“construction of history”, conception of “science” and the *rasa* framework of “emotive aesthetics” indigenous to Bengal and India.

Here, uncommon narrative structures and an eschewal of the “alien space-future time” trope common to Euro-American SF allows for increased historical self-reflexivity and interrogation of “otherness” on the axes of race, colonialism and class. Chronologically, these texts also map a shift in postcolonial ideologies, from inter-national concerns in the earliest Ghana-da series to intra-national concerns in the more contemporary utopic novelettes, challenging common conceptions of the “global” and the “local”.

These texts further interrogate “western science” by ambiguously imbricating its scientists and adventurers within worldwide scientific networks and challenging the center-periphery model of dissemination of scientific ideas. “Western science” is relationally posed with indigenous and esoteric scientific traditions, pseudo-scientific theories and diverse mythologies from within and beyond India, simultaneously providing an imaginative platform for popular dissemination of scientific ideas.

Thirdly, indigenous conceptions of “emotive aesthetics” (*rasa*) remain implicit in these texts. This works on the levels of both structure and content. I argue that *rasa* informs narrative structure even apart from specific elements such as causes, effects and determinants associated with particular *rasas*. I propose a renewed theoretical framework for critically examining SF by identifying the dominant literary aesthetic of SF as that of wonder (*adbhuta*). This framework further enables reading other emotive states, such as the comic and the grotesque, that accentuate the aesthetic response of wonder, which in turn create a complete emotive-aesthetic ambience and makes an SF text memorable to the reader.

By exploring SF from beyond its usual ambit, my dissertation engages with context-specific historical, scientific and emotive inflections and in so doing, broadens the genre’s “horizon of expectations”.

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IMAGINARY SCIENCE AND CULTURAL SIGNS: A CRITICAL STUDY OF BANGLA (BENGALI) SCIENCE FICTION

INTRODUCTION

This project seeks to analyze the phenomenon of *kalpabigyan* (imaginary-science), the term commonly used for science fiction (hereafter, SF) in Bangla (Bengali)¹ in the decades after Indian Independence. In recent decades, scholarly criticism on SF has burgeoned, but these, while often deeply insightful, have mostly limited their ambit to Anglophone SF, and been slow to recognize “non-western”, non-Anglophone SF beyond Japanese and Chinese. The lacuna is especially glaring when it comes to genre literature from the Indian subcontinent in general, and “Indian” SF in particular. On the one hand, while recent scholarship such as Patricia Kerslake’s *Science Fiction and Empire* (2010), Eric Smith’s *Globalization, Utopia and Postcolonial Science Fiction* (2012), and Jessica Langer’s *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction* (2012) recognize the category of “Indian” SF, their examples/analyses remain limited to Indian Writing in English

¹ I use the term “Bangla” to refer to the language and literature, and “Bengali” to refer to the culture and people.

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the Bangla are mine.

Note on transliteration:

For Bangla terms, I have retained established convention for names, and used a phonetic approximation in romanization. Only in cases where phonetic approximation was too awkward, I have used the Bangla Academy Romanization standard, for instance, the retroflex aspirated consonant ঙ as ɳ (“*Bhuture ghorī*” or “*Nakuṛbabu*”) or in the nasalization ঙ as ̃ (“*Buro Salikher Ghare Rño*”).

For Sanskrit terms, I have used diacritics following the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration. Some terms, such as *vijñāna* in Sanskrit and *bigyan* in Bangla, mean the same.

(IWE) texts, glossing over SF in at least seven major *bhasa*² or Indian- languages, which can be partly attributed, as Langer acknowledges, to a relative scarcity of translations into English from *bhasa* SF (Langer 1-2). But while Indians intellectuals have been writing in English since the early colonial era, and English today is one of the major languages of communication between linguistically diverse peoples of the subcontinent, it remains true that it is a language of the urban, upwardly-mobile elite, and a much larger set of the educated Indian readership has only a nominal grasp of and access to the language. Thus, “Indian” SF, if delimited only to those works originally written in English, is hardly representative of the much wider totality of all the SF written in India in the various *bhasa*.

The recent rise of the “Global Anglophone” studies phenomenon, seeking to incorporate into the disciplinary discourses of “English” studies texts from the “periphery”, has also fueled this sort of erroneous representation of “Indian” literature. In the South Asian context, “Global Anglophone” studies often elevates texts in Indian English (genre or otherwise, especially from the 1990’s onwards) to a much greater significance and visibility in the international arena than what they would be due, had they been read comparatively with similar works from *bhasa* literatures³. This dissertation is partly in response to that homogenizing tendency. On the other hand, *bhasa* literary criticism has for the most part steered clear of approaching genre fiction, relegating it to the status of mass culture and escapist entertainment. The few critical studies on *bhasa* SF have either been limited to the colonial period, such as Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay’s doctoral dissertation *Bangla Kalpabigyan: Science Fiction in a Transcultural Context*⁴ or been

² I use *bhasa* (“language” from Sanskrit) as a term for the indigenous languages of the Indian subcontinent and I prefer it over the terms “regional” or “vernacular” languages. The term was coined by GN Devy in *After Amnesia* (1992) and popularized by translation-focused publishers like Katha India.

³ Priyamvada Gopal makes this same argument in the first few pages of her introduction to *The Indian English Novel: Nation, History, and Narration* (2009).

⁴ Chattopadhyay’s other articles have been seminal in framing some parts of the argument in this dissertation; for instance, *kalpabigyan* as a concept and “games of truth” in tall-tales.

limited in length and scope, such as essays by Hans Herder, Debjani Sengupta and Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee.

The international attention that these latter critical studies have received in the field provides fertile ground for this study: a previously uncharted historiographical and thematological analysis of major postcolonial kalpabigyan (1945-2007) narratives from West Bengal, India. Through a reading of 5 texts/clusters (1945-2007), I delineate both a shift in literary-historical trajectories, and elucidate what appears to me as broad characteristics peculiar to the SF phenomenon in Bangla. The four series continue to retain immediate name-recognition and popularity amongst Bangla readers today, while *Manu Dwadosh (The Twelfth Manu)* has long been acclaimed by Bengali critics; this aspect of representativeness was the first selection criterion. Secondly, published mostly during a “Golden Age” of Bangla SF in the 1960’s and ‘70’s, they present significant enough variations in terms of postcolonial and critical-SF readings, extending the horizon of expectations of a “postcolonial SF” category. And finally, despite being pegged as *kishor sahitya* or (children-and-young-adult) literature marketed towards a 10-19 year age group, they confront mature socio-cultural issues like race, class, community and ecological conservation. Directly dealing with romantic relationships, sexuality and excessive violence in *kishor sahitya* was (and continues to be) not readily accepted within the Bengali social milieu. While this broad social expectation has delimited the horizons kalpabigyan in terms of the gendered “other”— and SF is a genre *par excellence* in examining the relationship between the “self” and the “other”— it opens up robust avenues of exploration into historicity, scientificity and aesthetic-emotive states ancillary to SF’s “sense of wonder”, particularly the comic and the grotesque.

In the chapters that follow, I do not read the texts as instances primarily of *kishor sahitya*, but of kalpabigyan. I employ three perspectives—“construction of history” (drawing on SF and postcolonial criticism), conception of “science” (drawing on histories and philosophies of science and technology) and the rasa framework of “emotive aesthetics” indigenous to Bengal and India— a combination that to the best of my knowledge has not yet been applied to SF criticism. The questions that drive my study are:

1. How does Bangla SF engage with the processes of history-making in the decades after Independence (1947) while responding to both colonial and intra-national ideological hegemonies?
2. How does Bangla SF rethink the broad category of “science”—what “science” means, what it may include or exclude and how and where is it produced?
3. How does Bangla SF engage with its indigenous literary traditions and incorporate aesthetic approaches that go beyond mere “local flavour”?

This introductory chapter has three broad sections. The first (short) section, titled “**Kalpabigyan and Kishor Sahitya**” provides a literary-historical overview of postcolonial Bangla SF from the vantage of its intersection with *kishor sahitya*, especially in contrast with Bangla SF from neighboring Bangladesh. The second section, “**Critical Concepts and Theoretical Frameworks**”, has four sub-sections, titled “**Postcolonial perspectives**”, “**Science Fiction criticism**”, “**History and Philosophy of Science**” and “**Rasa Theory**”. These sections provide an overview of the various fields of criticism with which this dissertation engages, their relevance to the primary texts in Bangla, and addresses the three central questions around which this dissertation is framed. I conclude the introduction with a one-page “**Chapter Outline**”.

KALPABIGYAN AND *KISHOR SAHITYA*

⁵It remains an interesting aspect of Bangla literary history that since the advent of “print capitalism” in the 19th century, practically every author worth their salt in mainstream fiction has written on scientists and scientific phenomena, and many of those were for younger readers (see also *The Gopal-Rakhal Dialectic*, xvii-xix). For instance, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay wrote a series of scientific articles titled *Bigyan Rahasya (Mysteries of Science, 1875)*; Rabindranath Tagore wrote song-poems such as “*Namo Jantro*” (“Prayer to the Machine”, 1922) caricaturing the deification of science and technology and *Totakahini* (1918), a satire on the mechanistic education system, all of which were targeted to young readers. As Sibaji Bandopadhyay and Satadru Sen have argued, the creation of a scientific-minded generation of future citizens was a significant element of anti-colonial nationalism, and these associations continue after Independence as well. These texts continue to be highly respected and read by adults, partly because the authors were canonized, and partly because *kishor sahitya* engaged with mature social issues such as caste, class, gender, colonialism and nationalist identity-formation in a “high-literary” style, often with humor and satire (see Freedman 24-26 for processes of canon formation). This trend has continued with 20th century authors such as Ashapura Devi and Sunil Gangyopadhyay. The only “missing” elements in *kishor sahitya*, broadly, are romance/sexuality (particularly marital discord and infidelity) and excessive depictions of violence and gore.

⁵ Information in this section culled from “Bengal SFE”, SK Das’s magisterial *History of Indian Literature*, 80; P. Gopal’s *The Indian English Novel: Nation, History, and Narration* 21-24; Mohan Lal ed. *The Encyclopedia of Indian Literature (Sasay to Zorgot)*. 3889-3890; Adrish Bardhan ed. *Sera Ascharja!*; “List of authors” < kalpabiswa.com> among others, and my extensive familiarity with Bangla genre fiction, particularly detective fiction, which, since the colonial era, has been the most popular genre for both adult and young readers.

In the section that follows, I delineate a literary-historical overview of the confluence between kalpabigyan and *kishor sahitya*, focusing on the authors considered in the dissertation, the three short-lived kalpabigyan magazines, and SF in Bangladesh.

Genre Emergence (1830's- 1910)

During the “Bengal Renaissance”(late 18th to mid 20th century), three significant instances of proto-SF in the mode of future history were published by Bengali authors—“A Journal of Forty Eight Hours of the Year 1945” (*The Calcutta Literary Gazette*, 6 June 1835) by Kylas Chunder Dutt, “The Republic of Orissa: A Page from the Annals of the Twentieth Century” (*The Saturday Evening Harakuru*, 25 May 1845) by Shoshee Chunder Dutt in English and Bhudev Mukhopadhyay’s uchronia (alternate history) *Swapnalabdha Bharatbarsher Itihas* (“The History of India as Revealed in a Dream”, 1862) in Bangla. The “dream narrative” also provides the basis for another major early work, Rokeya Shakhawat Hussain’s “Sultana’s Dream” (*The Indian Ladies Magazine*, 1905), also in English, which is considered one of the earliest instances of feminist SF globally. These were published as standalone volumes or in periodicals for mature audiences. In terms of narrative style, they shared with emergent-phase British SF a firm grounding in storyworlds verisimilar to then-contemporary contexts, within which the “dream vision” or similar devices that questioned the “truth-claim” of these narratives were inserted to transport the narrator to a past, future or alternate space-time.

The earliest instances of kalpabigyan proper can be identified in Hemlal Dutta’s “*Rahasya*” (“Mystery”, 1882), Jagadananda Ray’s “*Shukro Bhromon*” (“Travels in Venus” , 1892) and Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose’s “*Niruddesher Kahini*” (“The Story of the Missing One”) written in 1896; later significantly revised as “*Palatak Tufan*” (“The Runaway Sea-storm”, 1921), where Bose pegged the story as a *baiggyanik rahasya* or scientific mystery. In this phase,

Bengal, at the forefront of the colonial encounter, responded to the introduction of western science in popular worldview. Ideals of nationalism, visions of sovereignty from colonial rule and social Darwinism were the major focus of these early works.

Kalpabigyan Popularization (1920's-1950's)

Between the 1890's and 1920's several periodicals for 10-19 year old target readership, such as *Bharati o Balak* and *Mouchak* began publication, and these contained, along with SF and science fantasy, articles on scientific topics and biographies of prominent scientists, in order to inculcate a “scientific temper”⁶ among young-adults. This intersection of kalpabigyan and *kishor sahitya* was well-established by the 1930's, when several other periodicals such as *Ramdhanu*, *Rangmashal* and *Sandesh* began publication. Sukumar Ray's “The Diary of Hñeshoram Hñushiyaar” (1922), a satire on “metropolitan science”, is a significant text from this period. Satirical and adventure-type SF became popular with the prolific Hemendrakumar Ray's novels such as *Amanushik Manush* (*Inhuman Man*, 1950) and *Meghduter Martye Agaman* (*Meghduta's Advent on Earth*, 1933); Kshitindra Narayan Bhattacharya's stories “*Aswathama'r Paa*” (“The footsteps of Aswathama”) and “*Danober Dweep*” (“The island of Danavs”); and mainstream author Parasuram's (Rajsekhar Basu's pseudonym) “*Ulatpuran*” (“Upside-Down Puranas”, 1927), “*GaMaanush Jatir Katha*” (“The Story of the Race of Gamma-Men”, 1945) and “*Mangalik*” (“Martian”, 1955). Premendra Mitra, a prolific contributor to Bangla SF, also started publishing his Ghana-da series (SF tall-tales) from 1945. The confluence between *kishor sahitya* and genre fiction, especially detective and adventure fiction also becomes consolidated by the 1930's. These narratives combined an aspect of mystery-solving with dissemination of

⁶ Section IVA of the Indian Constitution, Article 51A on “Fundamental Duties” states: “It shall be the duty of every citizen of India...(h) To develop the scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform”.
<constitution.org>

scientific ideas, scientific speculation and re-discovery of ancient Indian knowledges and mythologies.

A Golden Age (1960's- 1990's)

Along with Mitra's *Ghana-da* (1945-88), *kalpabigyan* saw two long-running serialized "heroes": Satyajit Ray's Professor Shonku (1963-1999) and Adrish Bardhan's Professor Nat Boltu Chakra (late 1960's –late 2000's). As science-enthusiasts and scientists, these serialized protagonists stood apart from the crop of adventurers that preceded them, and the two later series also engaged with the science-superstition dichotomy by including both "hard" scientific theories and pseudoscience. These three series also had generic similarities with detective fiction, and mystery-solving and descriptions of foreign locations appealed to the Bengali reader voraciously experiencing the world through literature. In addition, there were three short-lived *kalpabigyan* magazines (*Ascharja*, *Bismay* and *Fantastic*) which attempted to transform the genre for an adult readership, but that project ultimately ended in failure.

While Mitra's *Ghana-da* stories were published in annuals targeted towards a children-young-adult audience, they continue to enjoy a significant adult readership, as evidenced in the numerous editorial and op-ed articles on the series in *Bangla*. Further, in the short story "Ghana-da's letters and Mou-Ka-Sha-Bish" (1985), a young reader complains in her letter to Ghanada that his scientific explanations are too difficult for her to understand while her college-going uncle can enjoy them fully. This meta-fictional device, for one, is reminiscent of the immense popularity of Sherlock Holmes and the device of publishing letters from readers in a playful undermining of the fictionality of the fictional detective or, in this case, the serialized *kalpabigyan* hero. This device of referring to "real" publishers and readers to consolidate the verisimilitude effect is present in all three series that this dissertation considers.

Unlike Mitra, who wrote realist and speculative fiction for both adult/mainstream audiences and young-adults, Satyajit Ray's fiction (also including his Feluda detective series and SFF-supernatural/ horror short stories which he illustrated in his signature style) was specifically written for older children and young-adults in order to revive the Ray family flagship periodical *Sandesh*. Ray never wrote for an adult readership, even though brand-recognition of the extremely popular *Sandesh* may have let his fiction reach new older readers ie. Bengali readers who did not read these stories when they were children (which is difficult to imagine given *Sandesh's* popularity). Ray also founded the Science Fiction Cine Club in Kolkata and encouraged a group of SF magazine authors and editors, including Adrish Bardhan.

Apart from his Nat Boltu Chakra series that incorporated existential crises of the sort not found in either Shonku or Ghana-da series, Bardhan contributed significantly to the translation of foreign SF and related genres, such as Jules Verne and H.P. Lovecraft's work, along with at least fifty SF stories and novellas. He also coined the term kalpabigyan to refer to SF in Bangla.

Adrish Bardhan was also intimately involved with the kalpabigyan magazines as a joint editor for all three of them. Bardhan, Ranen Ghosh, Amitananda Das and Sujit Dhar helmed three SF-exclusive magazines: *Ascharja* (1963-1968); *Fantastic* (1975-1976); and *Bismay* (1982-current, sporadically). These magazines published translations, "transcreations" of foreign SF and original work by authors such as Dilip Raychaudhuri, Samarjit Kar, Gurnek Singh and Enkashi Chattopadhyay, among others. These kalpabigyan magazines hoped to build an adult readership for SF, not only by privileging stand-alone futuristic narratives (Shonku and Ghanada have their narrative times set in the past) but also by introducing gender/sexuality as an operative category.

The failure of these magazines may perhaps be attributed to socio-political factors such as lack of funding and means of circulation. In a series of personal meetings, Ranen Ghosh recounts the struggle of their younger days: often, contributors could not be remunerated, the editors dipped into their own pockets for publication costs, ferried the issues on local trains by themselves, and on one instance, had to stop publishing when an associate embezzled the lump sum collected for the next issue (see also interview with Biswadeep De et al. *Kalpabiswa*). Another contextual factor for the failure is possibly the shift from English to Bangla as the medium for instruction in public schools during the CPI (M) regime (1977-2011). The CPI (M) regime has been severely criticized for “dumbing down” the quality of education in West Bengal, consequently causing Bengalis to “fall behind” other parts of India. Keeping the Japanese example in mind, it would be incorrect to argue that merely changing the medium of instruction would necessarily amount to cultural “falling back” or “dumbing down” of the Bengali people; however, this shift was also accompanied by a narrowness in engagement with broader global issues and political corruption and nepotism, where unfit candidates were often employed as teachers based on their political affiliation to the CPI (M). In any case, the Bangla SF magazines failed to have any significant impact in turning adult readership to SF.

Other children-and-young-adult magazines, such as *Kishor Gyan-Bigyan*, *Kishor Bharati*, *Anandamela* and *Shuktara* also published kalpabigyan during this period and continue to do so, but not exclusively. Leela Majumdar’s science fantasies such as “The Floating House” and “The Breeze’s Wand”, Bimal Kar’s “The Mysterious Moonlight of Mandargada” and Anish Deb’s early SF are also notable from this period. Syed Mustafa Siraj’s Colonel Niladri detective series included some stories with significant SF elements, such as “The Twang of Shiva’s Mighty Bow” and “Scientist Chandakanta’s Lunar Adventure”. Overall, there was a wide proliferation of

themes, from social critique (Ray, Mitra, Leela Majumdar, Syed Mustafa Siraj) to futuristic explorations, aliens and alternate worlds (the magazines).

Contemporary Trends (1990's- 2017)

After the untimely demise of the Bangla SF magazines, kalpabigyan has yet to recover from the *kishor sahitya* tag that accompanies it. A case in point is the career trajectory of Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay, tremendously successful in writing for both adult and young-adult readers. Mukhopadhyay, after writing a couple of mature kalpabigyan novels such as *Ishara* (*Sign*) and *3002* for an adult readership in the late 1960's, switched entirely to writing science-fantasy/ magical realist narratives located in romanticized rural/small-town settings with his “*adbhuture* series” (a neologism-portmanteau of “*adbhut*” [weird] and “*bhuture*” [ghostly]- ie. Ghostly-Weird series) targeted at older children and young adults, penning another adult-kalpabigyan novella “The Forest Goddess and Five Pigeons” only in 2015.

Adrish Bardhan, Anish Deb and Ranen Ghosh continued to write kalpabigyan during this period. Deb's “23 hours 60 minutes” (2004-10) and its sequel “60 minutes 23 hours” (2014) are notable in being a forerunner to the Hunger Games type of reality-TV survival game in a futuristic, corporate-owned society. Renowned mainstream author Sunil Gangopadhyay created “Neelmanush”, a genetically mutated blue superhero, and Samaresh Majumdar, author of children-and-young-adult detective character Arjun, wrote a few stories where Arjun visits futuristic or alien worlds. Detective fiction has also begun to occupy a more sizable chunk in *kishor sahitya* in the last three decades, with Bimal Kar's magician-cum-sleuth “KiKiRa” series, Sunil Gangopadhyay's “Kakababu and Shontu” series, Samaresh Majumdar's “Arjun” series, Sasthipada Chattopadhyay's “Pandav Goyenda” series and Suchitra Bhattacharya's female detective “Mitin-mashi” series, to name a few.

In 2017, a group of *kalpabigyan* enthusiasts started the webmag *Kalpabiswa*, which features work by upcoming authors such as Debojyoti Bhattacharyya, Abhigyan Roychowdhury, Anindya Sengupta and others, along with critical overviews and translations of foreign SF. Sengupta's *Oparthibo* (*Unworldly*, 2015) and Debaroti Ghosh's *kalpabigyan* thriller *Ishwar Jokhon Bondi* (*When God is Chained*, 2016) have recently had some success in incorporating adult ideas and critiques of sexuality and violence in *kalpabigyan*.

Coming full circle, Bengali authors have also contributed to the recent trend in Indian Writing in English (IWE) SF: notably Amitabh Ghosh (*The Calcutta Chromosome*, 1995), Samit Basu (*Gameworld* trilogy, 2004-7) and Rimi B. Chatterjee (*Signal Red*, 2005).

SF in Bangladesh (1971-)

The political partition of Bengal after Independence was accompanied by a partition of its literature as well. It is regrettable that readers and critics in West Bengal today pay little heed to the literary scenario in Bangladesh, especially as Bangladesh has been much more successful in representing Bangla globally (for instance, by developing Bangla software) and vice versa (with a flourishing translation industry, particularly Hasan Khurshid Rumi's translations of genre fiction). Between 1947-1970, East Pakistan did not produce any SF texts of note. We find SF emergence here only after *Muktijuddha* (1971) and the independence of Bangladesh.

From the early 1970's three prominent writers, who are also coincidentally brothers, took the Bangladeshi literary scenario by storm. Foremost among them is Humayun Ahmed (1948-2012)—author, dramatist, screenwriter, playwright and filmmaker—who is revered as Bangladesh's leading literary icon today. Apart from his massively successful mainstream novels, he wrote about 20 SF novels, such as *Tomader Jonnyo Bhalobasha* (*Love for you all*), *Fiha Somikoron* (*The Fiha Equations*), *Ananta Nakshatra Beethi* (*The Endless Galaxy*) (collected in 3

vols. by Oitijhya Publishers, Dhaka). His youngest brother, cartoonist Ahsan Habib, also contributed significantly by helming the SF magazine *Moulik* from 1997 and encouraging a young generation of SF writers such as Ali Imam, Anirudho Alam and Qazi Anwar Hussain. Overall, since the 1990's, Bangla SF has been flourishing in Bangladesh, much more than in West Bengal.

But the indubitable emperor of Bangladeshi SF is Muhammad Zafar Iqbal (1952-)—physicist, former researcher at Caltech, humanitarian activist. He has contributed significantly to *kishor sahitya* and penned over 45 SF novels and collections of short stories (1976-) which are collected in *Science Fiction Samagra* in 5 volumes, published by Prateek Publishers, Dhaka. His oeuvre is significantly different from his West Bengali contemporaries in its portrayal of distinctly futuristic and/or dystopian Asimovian worlds with robots, androids, AI's and, since the late 1990's, corrupt government-funded research agencies that perform unethical genetic experiments on animals and humans. Social critique is also very pointed, especially in the role of multinational U.S. companies exploiting the poor Bangladeshi population in sweatshops and illegal research facilities. Zafar Iqbal's SF, for which he prefers the moniker *baiggyanik kalpakahini* (stories based on scientific imagination), is read by adults as well, and many plots involve romance, sexuality, violence and gore. They also diverge from kalpabigyan in West Bengal in excluding mythology, Islamic or otherwise, and the comic rasa, with the exception of two collections of short stories: *Biggyani Shofdor Ali'r Moha Moha Abishkar (Scientist Shofdor Ali's wonderful and incredible Inventions)* and *Saira Scientist*, the stories of a scatterbrained female researcher. While I initially sought to include some instances of this fascinating and untranslated oeuvre in this dissertation, I regret that I could not do so due to time and space constraints.

CRITICAL CONCEPTS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS I

Postcolonial Perspectives

Two general features of postcolonial kalpabigyan will appear immediately striking to the SF-literate reader. First, they are usually set in a past or present time in settings verisimilar to the “real” contemporary world (the three series and the utopic novelettes), or familiar in the basic worldbuilding template (hunter-gatherer communities in *Manu Dwadosh*), challenging “western”⁷ SF’s expectations of narrative space-time as alien space-future time. This preoccupation with the past or the present within the narrative of the text itself is distinct from Fredric Jameson’s argument that SF does not “give us ‘images’ of the future, but rather defamiliarize[s] and restructure[s] our experience of our own present” (“Progress vs. Utopia”, 151). Stories set in alien-space-future-time can reexamine pressing issues of the present time; in fact, sometimes this mode of criticism can prove to be very effective. However, a great deal of detail in futuristic texts is geared towards the creation and familiarization of non-familiar gadgets, environments and creatures who inhabit therein, and the relationships which obtain between them must be *discovered*⁸. But in texts dealing with the present or the past in verisimilar settings, most of these relationships are always already explicit. As such, the text may focus more directly on issues like race, colonialism, class or gender, illuminating them with instances drawn from

⁷ American, British and to some extent, Russian SF, in particular, as these continue to be “dominant” in terms of sales and availability worldwide. While I recognize that “western” SF is by no means a unified monolith plagued by racial, cultural and economic exclusion of the “non-Western” “other” especially since the 1960’s, my study might appear to be guilty of strawmanning it. However, I must note that this charge presumes that the authors considered in this dissertation had easy access to, and were aware of, then-contemporary trends in American, British and Russian SF. As I discuss more fully here and elsewhere, this was usually not the case; instead, kalpabigyan in general has responded to older trends and writers in SFF such as Rider Haggard, Asimov, the US magazines etc.

⁸ Wendy B. Faris makes a similar argument for magical realism in “Scheherazade’s Children”: “Through that combination of history and selective magical detail (*as opposed to the creation of a separate imaginary realm*), magical realism moves beyond the way in which, as Jameson formulates it, in high realism and naturalism, time seems sealed off in its ‘perfected narrative apparatus’” (emphasis mine, 181).

everyday life or history, and then using scientific innovation to estrange the reader and provide alternative suggestions for “real” world solutions.

Second, kalpabigyan employs various narrative strategies that are uncommon at best within the broad corpus of 20th century “western” SF: for instance, Premendra Mitra’s *Ghana-da* is a teller of tall-tales, Satyajit Ray’s *Professor Shonku* stories are a series of personal diaries, Adrish Bardhan’s *Professor Nat Boltu* series is ruptured by extreme unevenness/ non-continuity between episodic plots and so on. The employment of narrative structures that question the “truth-claim” of the narratives points also to what I call a “peculiar postcolonial anxiety” (discussed in chapters I and II). In exploring the connections between Empire and SF genre emergence, SF author and critic Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. argues:

The dominant SF nations are precisely those that attempted to expand beyond their national borders in imperialist projects: Britain, France, Germany, Soviet Russia, Japan, and the US.

[T]he emergence of sf as a genre are made possible by three factors: the technological expansion that drove real imperialism, the need felt by national audiences for literary-cultural mediation as their societies were transformed from historical nations into hegemony, and the fantastic model of achieved technoscientific Empire...The genre's favorite counterfactual operations and mechanisms are all made rational by imperial ontology...[which] rely on a cosmos governed by the laws and right of technoscience, and yet are open to almost infinite variation.

The cognitive attraction of sf is closely linked to the imaginary world-model of Empire. (“Science Fiction and Empire” 231-37)

This ideological continuation on “real world empires” is responsible for the fact that a majority of SF texts produced in these nations (Csicsery-Ronay cites Japan and Germany as “special cases”) attempt to expand the pale of humankind to the furthest reaches of the universe both in space and time, on the principle of “infinite variation”, expansion and “the laws and right of technoscience”. But what of SF from those nations that were previously colonized and dispossessed of their history, and perhaps consequently, dispossessed also of an autonomous

imagined future? In the particular case of kalpabigyan, this *inability* may be read into the “political unconscious”⁹ of the texts, leading to a questioning of the “truth-claim” of the narratives and stemming from the complicated relationship of the formerly colonized with their own history—ie. before one can conquer the future, one must claim the past and correct the present.

This conjunction, I argue, opens direct and robust avenues towards historical self-reflexivity, and explores social and cultural problematics that *may* or *may not* be directly connected to the technoscientific innovations or “novums” of the narratives. In the earliest Ghana-da tall-tales set in the colonial era, the “self-other” binary (and overcoming it) becomes the most explored plot concern, where Ghana-da, as the ultimate Bengali hero, defeats villainous “western” entrepreneurs and mad-scientists who care little for humanity, ethics or the environment. Mitra’s dystopia *Manu Dwadosh* is similarly prefaced by the author as being set in a world imagined in accordance with Puranic cosmogony, foregrounding a disjuncture with dominant “western” notions of time as progressing ceaselessly into the future. Ray’s Professor Shonku, too, while enjoying international renown from global scientific peers and institutions, is beset by “postcolonial anxiety” on account of his non-traditional scientific praxis and a greater effect of slander on his reputation. Bardhan’s Nat Boltu, on the other hand, grapples with the onslaught of both foreign and domestic hegemonies, and responds to the “western” SF canon by appropriating and reworking those very narratives that centralized the white male hero and made

⁹ “Political unconscious” may be understood as

A concept created by Fredric Jameson to articulate the implicit political dimension of creative works. First proposed in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981), the political unconscious draws on and adapts Freud’s notion of wish-fulfilment and Lévi-Strauss’s notion of the savage mind (‘pensée sauvage’) to construct the hypothesis that artistic works can be seen as symbolic solutions to real but unconsciously felt social and cultural problems. The task of the cultural critic is then to find the means of reconstructing the original problem for which the text as symbolic act is a solution. This approach to textual criticism turns not so much on the question of what does a particular text mean as why it exists in the form that it does. (“Political unconscious” <oxfordreference.com>)

monsters out of racial and gendered “others”. Mukhopadhyay’s eutopias, in contrast, in their self-encapsulated, frozen-in-time townships, relegate the “white” colonizer to the crumbling pages of history and refuse to acknowledge foreign and domestic hegemons by not representing them at all.

Thus, a clear trajectory of shifting (and dual) postcolonial responses over time can be identified between 1945 and 2007. Of these two facets of postcolonialism, the first has been extensively studied by scholars from India, where it may be read as so many ways in which the “native” responded, or could respond, to British colonial policies and cultural hegemony. Much of the early work by scholars such as Partha Chatterjee, Homi Bhaba, Dipesh Chakraborty and Gayatri Spivak, among others, draw their case studies from nineteenth or early twentieth century texts and social phenomena. While their contributions to critical theory remain pertinent for more contemporary texts, and the two chronologically earlier series, namely *Ghana-da* and *Shonku*, could well be read in the light of the “subaltern”¹⁰ or Bhaba’s “mimic man”, Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (and Sibiji Bandyopadhyay’s *Gopal-Rakhal Dialectic* which draws from Said and Michel Foucault to read colonial children’s literature in Bangla) permeates my arguments to a much greater degree. But while cultural specifics like *adda*¹¹ as discussed by Dipesh Chakraborty have remained in contemporary cultural practice in Bengal, shifting social realities in independent India make some concepts, for instance, Partha Chatterjee’s “inside-outside” dichotomy¹², somewhat untenable in present times and for contemporary Bangla SF as well.

¹⁰ For Partha Chatterjee’s take on the “demise” of Subaltern Studies, see “After Subaltern Studies”, where he states “The image of the subaltern rebel so meticulously portrayed by us now seemed like a throwback to the days of the British Raj – a construct that historians of colonial India might find useful but one that would be of little help in understanding the contemporary Indian peasant” (45)

¹¹ Adda are informal get-togethers between like-minded individuals, fostering intellectualism. Seen as a peculiarly Bengali cultural phenomenon, and criticized for “promoting laziness” (Chakraborty, “Adda”)

¹² See Partha Chatterjee *The Nation and its Fragments*.

If, following Robert Young, we consider as postcolonial, the texts and theories that “seek to combat the continuing, often covert operation of an imperialist system of economic, political and cultural domination”, then we must also recognize that an “imperialist system” doesn’t necessary need to be foreign; it can, and does operate within national boundaries (Young 58). The quickly expanding “economic, political and cultural domination” of the Hindi-Hindu “center”, can be clearly perceived in the early ideological conflicts between Gandhi and Subhas Chanda Bose, or the ever-increasing contemporary encroachment of entrepreneurs and fundamentalist groups from northern and western India into the previously Marxist and now “populist”¹³ but “secular”¹⁴ Bengal. These shifting social realities also undercut familiar representations of postcolonial attitudes, in that the everyday affairs of the ordinary Bengali person is much more concerned with contemporary, intra-national “Hindi-Hindu imperialism” than any diffused cultural hegemony of that rarely seen creature, the “white man”. Because a great majority of contemporary Bangla SF (from West Bengal at least) remains unable to cut ties with verisimilar past and present settings in their fictional worldbuilding, these tensions spill over as well.

A clear, albeit diffuse postcolonial perspective informs my discussions on the three other bodies of critical theory, where I am invested in exploring how an SF tradition from the “periphery” interrogates central and canonical formations of the genre, of science, and of aesthetics.

¹³ Chatterjee describes populism as “a process of the temporary and often fragile aggregation of disparate groups under a common signifier called “the people” assembled against a putative enemy of the people”(“After Subaltern Studies”, 47).

¹⁴ For Partha Chatterjee’s analysis of more contemporary realities in Bengal particularly, see chapters 3, 6 and 7 in *The Politics of the Governed*.

CRITICAL CONCEPTS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS II

Science Fiction Criticism

In the madness of the contemporary world, it is difficult to determine where science ends and where fiction begins. It is impossible for fiction to surpass the horrors of napalm or nerve gas, and the wildest fantasies of science fiction writers have a way of becoming scientific fact...Because of this unique relationship, dominant for the first time in our prose tradition, *science fiction can be viewed as the most accurately reflective literary genre of our time.* (Emphasis mine. Schwartz 1043)

This excerpt indicates clearly, how, at least since the 1970's, "western" SF critics have been arguing that the genre can indeed contribute to a critical understanding of our current contexts and future aspirations. Indeed, what exactly constitutes SF as a genre has been the matter of much contention in scholarly circles. Definitions by early practitioners of the genre, such as Heinlein, Asimov, Clarke and others have emphasized the position of man within the universe and upheld mostly unproblematic virtues of positivistic progress spearheaded by the "white man". Some of these early definitional attempts resonated with postcolonial kalpabigyan authors, who emphasized upholding universal moral and ethical values, and acknowledged the role of international SF in spreading scientific and SF-literacy to acclimatize the (Bengali) reader with the SF megatext (as I discuss in Chapter III). However, for purposes of analysis, Bangla SF must be read in conjunction with theories and texts that take definitional matters beyond common themes and universal moral values, even though it may not fit neatly within "western" parameters of the genre.

At least three distinct “streams” may be identified in SF criticism today¹⁵. The first “stream”, following Darko Suvin’s characterization of SF as a literature of “cognitive estrangement”, may be discerned in the theorizations of Frederic Jameson, Carl Freedman, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. and Carl Malmgren among others. The second “stream”, following Samuel Delany’s characterization of SF as based on linguistic modeling as concretization of metaphor, is followed by Paul Kinkaid and others. And the third “stream”, following John Rieder’s historicist revisions of SF as a genre, has been taken up by upcoming scholars such as Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay, Paul Williams (*Race, Ethnicity and Nuclear War: Representations of Nuclear Weapons and Apocalyptic Worlds*, 2011) and Rachel Haywood Ferreira (*Emergence of Latin American Science Fiction*, 2011), among others. The theoretical underpinnings of evaluating the science-fictional in the texts considered in the dissertation draws in greater degree from the first and third “streams”. While I mention Jameson’s and Delany’s theorizations occasionally, I have not explored them at any length in the dissertation.

Darko Suvin’s *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979) remains one of the more robust theorizations in the field, where he proposes the concept of the “novum”, the scientifically plausible “new thing” which gives rise to “cognitive estrangement”. His conception of science fiction as a “*literature of cognitive estrangement*” and his polemic against “second rate SF” arises from a broadly Marxist perspective (Italics in the original. *Metamorphoses* 4). For Suvin, “cognition” implies “not only a reflecting *of* but also *on* reality”, “a creative approach tending toward a dynamic transformation rather than a static mirroring of the author’s environment”; it is thus necessarily a “*critical*” one and bears close kinship with the “philosophical fundamentals of

¹⁵ For concision, I have not considered here theories of the fantastic defined broadly, for example, in Tzvetan Todorov’s *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (1970); nor have I engaged robustly with the vocabularies and vast body of scholarly criticism on utopias and dystopias, as much of the latter is only tangentially relevant to texts considered here.

modern science” (Italics in the original. *Metamorphoses*10). In fact, “*a cognitive—in most cases strictly scientific—element becomes a measure of aesthetic quality, of the specific pleasure to be sought in SF*” (Italics in the original. *Metamorphoses*15). As for “estrangement”, Suvin adapts from Viktor Shklovsky (*ostranenie*) and Bertolt Brecht (*Verfremdungseffekt*) the concept of “alienation”, “a representation ... which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar” (*Metamorphoses* 6; see also “Ostranenie”; “Alienation effect”). Then, taking “*science* for cognition and *fiction* for estrangement” Suvin identifies a “potential cognitive tendency” that however, must be allied to “the rise of subversive social classes”. The “opposing tendency towards mystifying escapism that dominates second-rate SF” merely “degrades estrangement to a formal, surface sensationalism that first shocks the bourgeois but then rejoins him” (*Metamorphoses* ix).

While colonial and postcolonial Bengali intellectuals and authors were no strangers to Marxist ideologies—the Communist Party of India (CPI) was founded in 1925, and the Communist Party of India (Marxist), which split off from the CPI in 1964 was in political power in West Bengal between 1977-2011—it appears that Bangla SF largely failed to embrace “the rise of subversive social classes” charge as outlined by Suvin. Indeed, all the central characters in the texts here are more-or-less aligned to the Bengali middle-class, which had accrued significant social capital since colonial times. This introduces an interesting problematic of how the literary production of a social class, considered dominant in its immediate social sphere, may, especially in the context of “first” and “third” world social realities, come to be considered marginalized in other contexts. “Subversion” in itself, though, remains one of the characteristics of postcolonial Bangla SF—whether against the “white colonizer”, the “western” scientific establishment, the processes of neo-liberalization within the plots of the texts, or, as a genre, against mainstream

Bangla literature. Many other details in the worldbuilding of the primary texts here stand diametrically opposed to Suvin's formulations, and not surprisingly, fall out of his definitional margins, as they do also in the case of the literary utopia, as Suvin sums up in his recent collection of essays, *Defined by a Hollow* (2010)¹⁶.

Following and tempering Suvin's strict formulation of "*science* for cognition", Carl Freedman¹⁷ proposes the "cognition effect" or "the attitude of *the text itself* to the kind of estrangements being performed". This is alternately formulated by Csicsery-Ronay as "an illusion of valid knowledge...propped up by convincing, but ultimately merely discursive...legitimizing arguments by authoritative scientific voices" (italics in the original, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* 18; *Seven Beauties* 140). Freedman argues that focusing on "cognition" proper forces critics to make "generic distinctions [based on] matters far removed from literature and genre"—"must we wait for scientific consensus before deciding whether a text is science fiction or fantasy?" (*Critical Theory* 17). Both "cognition" and "estrangement" are thus reducible to their "effect", depending on shared worldviews between author and reader—what may be considered estranging is largely dependent on cultural parameters that vary from place to place and what may be considered science may merely be a function of authority and power. For instance, keeping in mind a fairly consistent stream of reimagining "Vedic science" to fit colonial and postcolonial contexts and its conjunction with the recent "mythological wave" in current SF and fantasy in Indian Writing in English, the idea that the

¹⁶ I discuss "eutopia" from Suvin's *Defined by a Hollow* in chapter V.

¹⁷ Freedman, in his 1987 essay "Science Fiction and Critical Theory", has an interesting, albeit factually incorrect and somewhat objectionable take on "third world" SF—he argues that the "third world" does not need SF because it has magical realism, and "in the Third World realism itself is, as it were, naturally SF. It is not mundane because the mundane, in the First World sense, does not exist" there (198). While this argument is on the lines of Jameson's much-contested "Third World literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" where Jameson argues that "third world" novels are actually nationalist allegories in sum, it is more interesting to note that the issue of "third world" and/or "postcolonial" SF needs to be addressed in one way or another by "western" SF criticism.

Vedic civilization had nuclear weapons and spaceships functions less as a factor of estrangement, both culturally and scientifically, to a contemporary pan-Indian, conversant-in-English readership, than it would to a “western” readership (for instance, see Amish Tripathi’s *Shiva Trilogy*, 2010-13).

Following Suvin, but turning to a more formalist reading of SF, Carl Malmgren proposes two useful frameworks that are more widely applicable: a “typology” of SF and the category of “Science Fantasy”. Malmgren argues that every SF story comprises, like the lexicon and syntax of a language, two components, a *world* and a *story*. Divested of its otherworldly or futuristic trappings, SF plots largely coincide with those of realist fiction; therefore, its distinctiveness lies in its world. The rootedness of SF worlds in the scientific episteme, however, assures the reader that it shares many essential features with the reader’s empirical world, for instance, “materiality, regularity, predictability, intelligibility”, consistency and coherence (*Worlds Apart* 17). The world consists of four interanimating and interlocking systems, namely—actants, social order, topology and natural laws. By inserting a novum into one of these systems, Malmgren identifies four different SF types and their thematic loci:

- 1) Actantal—Alien encounter—Self/Other
- 2) Social Order—Alternate society—Self/Society
- 3a) Topos-Object—Gadget SF—Self/Technology
- 3b) Topos-Planet—Alternate world—Self/Environment
- 4) Fact—Science Fantasy—Epistemology and Ontology (*Worlds Apart* 18)

Of course, a text may well be characterized by actantal, societal *and* topological transformations; however, only one of these novums functions as the narrative dominant, by virtue of its precedence, instrumentality or centrality (*Worlds Apart* 17). The fourth set, where a novum inserted into natural laws (historical fact/ scientific fact/ natural actant) creates an “impure form”, the Science Fantasy, whose thematic loci are epistemology and ontology (*Worlds*

Apart 18). Strictly speaking, all the texts considered here contain elements of Science Fantasy, as I discuss in Chapter II.

Another important concept Malmgren repurposes for SF criticism is the *grapholect*—“a writing practice whose discourse is diacritically marked by the imprint of a specific historical, sociological and cultural matrix”; ie. in the case of SF, its scientificity (conditions determining what is considered scientific activity) is context-dependent (*Worlds Apart*, 8). For instance, a novum like intelligent life on Mars in HG Wells’s “scientific romance” *The War of the Worlds* may be considered as cognitively valid only within the grapholect of its publication in 1897, at which time astronomy had not conclusively proved that there is, in fact, no possibility of sentient life on Mars (Redd, “Life on Mars”). If contemporary SF, set in a verisimilar storyworld, refers to technologically advanced indigenous alien life-forms on Mars, then, it serves less as a novum and more as irony and/or satire, for instance in Satyajit Roy’s Shonku story *Diary of a Spacefarer* (1961) or Premendra Mitra’s *Ghana-da in Mars* (1973), where such encounters with aliens becomes a vehicle for exploring postcolonial possibilities and ideologies, as I explore in chapter I.

The second “stream” of SF criticism, following Samuel Delany, takes a linguistic approach to the genre. In “About 5,750 words”, Delany argues how a consideration of individual words and their sequencing affect both aesthetic pleasure derived from reading as well as the ease or difficulty of images and meanings created in the reader’s perception, where “content” becomes subservient to “style” (8)¹⁸. This property is especially crucial to SF because the estrangement-cognition nexus on which the aesthetic pleasure of SF depends works only if the

¹⁸ For instance, he argues that changing even one word in every sentence of an exciting SF adventure tale like Roger Zelazny’s “The Doors of His Face, the Lamps of His Mouth” (1971) to a close synonym would “diminish the excitement by half and expunge every trace of wit.” And if allowed to “change one word and *add* one word... I can make it so dull as to be practically unreadable. Yet a paragraph by paragraph synopsis of the ‘content’ will be the same.” (“About 5,750 words”, 8)

reader grasps literally what would otherwise have been metaphorical; ie. SF translates metaphor to a literal plane. Next, he argues that what distinguishes science fiction from naturalistic fiction, fantasy and reportage is the level of ‘subjunctivity’¹⁹. Subjunctivity determines the reading of the entire text, and each sentence on the syntagmatic axis modifies the interpretation: what we understand as SF are linguistic relations constructed in a narrative—“estrangement” is “restricted to the signifier vis-a-vis other genres” (*The Jewel Hinged Jaw* 141). Within SF, ie. events that *have not happened*, Delany postulates several subcategories which are also subcategories of SF—those that *might happen* (“technological and sociological predictive tales”), those *that will not happen* (“science fantasy”), those *that have not happened yet* (dystopian/utopian tales), those *that have not happened in the past* (parallel world), those *that could have happened but did not* (alternate histories) (Emphasis in the original. “About 5,750 words” 11).

The essay also demonstrates some recognition of “science” as an integral part of SF, for example, in his discussion of the example “winged dog”²⁰ (“About 5,750 words” 12). However, this recognition is not worked out in any depth and he fails to appreciate the specific relationship between SF and the modern, 20th century understanding of sciences. For instance, in an interview, Delany speaks of the emergence of SF only in the 1920’s with an ur-period of a maximum of thirty years; however, according to his subjunctivity principle, any fiction that describes events that *have not happened* would qualify as SF irrespective of where and when they were written,

¹⁹ Delany posits:

Subjunctivity is the tension on the thread of meaning that runs between (to borrow Saussure’s term for ‘word’:) sound-image and sound-image... (the level of subjunctivity for reportage is) *this happened*... The subjunctivity level for a series of words labelled naturalist fiction is defined by: *could have happened*... (For fantasy) the level of subjunctivity becomes: *could not have happened*.... But when spaceships, ray guns, or more accurately any correction of images that indicates the future appears in a series of words and mark it as SF, the subjunctivity level is changed once more. These objects, these convocations of objects into situations and events, are blanketly defined by: *have not happened*. (“About 5,750 words”, 11)

²⁰ A “winged dog” is meaningless in naturalistic fiction and a mere “visual correction” in fantasy, which however, for an SF reader, would necessarily involve a consideration of “evolution”—“whether the dog has forelegs or not”, “modification of breastbone and musculature of the wings”, “hollow bones (and) heart rate” etc. (12).

making arbitrary Delany's reading of SF as a twentieth century phenomenon (*Silent Interviews* 26). In Delany's discussion, this relationship is implicit and the lack of clarity somewhat obfuscates his otherwise interesting linguistic proposition.

Following Delany, Paul Kincaid however takes issue with a broad application of the literalization of metaphor axiom, and argues that SF, rather than have its "own unique commonality of meaning", works because "you discover the strangeness afresh...in the familiarity of the words", and not necessarily in their defamiliarization, by way of neologism or otherwise (*What is it we do when we read science fiction* 10-11). Rather than identify a linguistic commonality in all SF, he argues that utilizing Ludwig Wittgenstein's conception of "family resemblances" (from his analysis of sport) is much more useful in mapping a set of relations between specific elements. Instead of fixing SF to a specific pattern that disregards its constant state of flux, "family resemblances are more flexible, since they allow us to keep pace with every change in the genre...all we need as a starting point is common agreement that something is science fiction" (18). "Family resemblances" also allows us to account for the intermixing of genres; for instance, when a text such as Asimov's *Caves of Steel* resembles both science fiction and detective fiction, there would be no problem in identifying discrete elements from both sets, and analyzing the novel on the basis of "web of resemblances".

The third "stream" of SF criticism could be called historicist and supra-genological; ie. where the definitional status of the genre itself is under revision, as in John Rieder's criticism. Reider, following Kincaid's usage of "web of resemblances" (along with criticism by Sherryll Vint, Mark Bould and others), proposes five hypotheses:

- 1) sf is historical and mutable; 2) sf has no essence, no single unifying characteristic, and no point of origin; 3) sf is not a set of texts, but rather a way of using texts and of drawing relationships among them; 4) sf's identity is a differentially articulated position in an

historical and mutable field of genres; 5) attribution of the identity of sf to a text constitutes an active intervention in its distribution and reception. (“On Defining SF, or Not: Genre Theory, SF, and History” 193)

The advantages of these propositions to an analysis of non-English SF in particular are clear. Recognizing the historicity of SF allows us to draw direct relationships between the text and the context, even though the latter might be unevenly predicated on technoscientific modernity, as is the case of colonial and postcolonial Bengal. Disavowing any “essence” or “point of origin” similarly allows for a reconsideration of historical contexts behind the texts, without ascribing different SF traditions from different parts of the world to dominant origins, whether British, American or Russian, among others. This goes against the grain of the pervasive popular opinion that non-western SF is derivative of or dependent on western SF, shared by both western and non-western critics until recently. Rather, genre, following Hans-Robert Jauss’s reception theory, can never have a “first example”, as the “generic character is precisely what is repeated and conventional... Genre, therefore, is always found in the middle of things, never at the beginning of them” (196).

Rieder’s discussion of the third proposition hinges on generic hybridity of the sort discussed by Kincaid earlier, in the coexistence of elements from different genres within a single text. The fourth proposition, an analysis of genre fiction as a “mass-cultural” system and its tumultuous relationship with the “classical-academic” system of “serious” literature, is instructive in reading fluctuating interrelationships in the Bangla literary-publication sphere, between “genre fiction”, “children-and-young-adult” literature and “mainstream” literature. This in turn may be linked also with his fifth proposition about “distribution and reception”, which I have indicated, but not analyzed fully, as it leads to book-historical considerations. While publication data has not always been available for the texts considered in this dissertation, I have

attempted to elucidate these “distribution and reception” processes at the beginning of each chapter, and particularly in Chapter V. However, despite the advantages of Rieder’s proposed system, he does not specify the core characteristic of this “web of resemblances”, namely science, and we must therefore also look back to “cognition as science” and “cognition effect” to complete the picture.

Following Rieder and others, Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay’s work on genre emergence of SF in colonial Bengal argues that just as the juxtaposition of imperialism and technoscience in the “west” provided the necessary historical conditions for the emergence of SF there, the introduction of a “scientific temper” in colonial Bengal provided parallel conditions for the emergence of SF in Bengal (*Bangla Kalpabigyan* 89). Genre emergence spread over a three-fold set of “science stories”—tales of real scientists and inventions, tales of scientific experiments and natural phenomena shorn of jargon for a non-specialist readership and finally, fictional stories that use scientific information. The fictional stories in the phase of genre emergence either extrapolated from known scientific theories—for instance, in Acharya Jagadish Chandra Roy’s “*Niruddesher Kahini*” (“The Story of the Missing One” 1896) revised as “*Palatak Tufan*” (“Runaway Sea-Storm” 1921) or constructed fictional anthropologies akin to early adventure fiction in the “west”— for instance, in Jagadananda Ray’s “*Shukro Bhromon*” (“Travels in Venus” 1892) or Premendra Mitra’s “*Paatale Panch Bochor*” (“Five years in the Underworld” 1931) (*Bangla Kalpabigyan* 89). This last set was variously identified as “*bigyan-nirbhar galpa* (science dependent stories)”, “*bigyan-bhittik galpa* (science based stories)” and “*baiggyanik rahasya* (scientific mystery)” (*Bangla Kalpabigyan* 55).

Combining scientific speculation, science fantasy, mystery and adventure, these later came to be considered under the umbrella term *kalpabigyan*, coined by Adrish Bardhan in 1962.

While the more common associations in this portmanteau, “*kalpa*”, abbreviated from “*kalpana*” or “imagination” and “*bigyan*” or “science” (together, the “imaginary science” of the title of this dissertation) are cited by Bardhan as subtending his coinage, Chattopadhyay goes further to re-read the word “*kalpa*” itself as indicative of a span of time in Hindu cosmology, and re-identifies *kalpabigyan* as “the transformation of material knowledge over time”, as I discuss in chapter IV (*Bangla Kalpabigyan* 7-17; “Bengal”). While the term “*kalpabigyan*” is now accepted across West Bengal to refer to Bangla SF, Bangladeshi author Md. Jafar Iqbal prefers to use the epithet *baigyanik kalpakahini*, which stresses on the “*kahini*” or “story”, ie. the fictional aspect of the tale. Indeed, in comparison to *kalpabigyan*, Jafar Iqbal’s *baigyanik kalpakahini* have far fewer verisimilar and mythic elements, and generally shares many more elements with the SF megatext, generating a “web of resemblances” that will be immediately identifiable to the western reader.

Chattopadhyay also proposes the interesting concept of the mythologerm, a “tendency to continually rework the history of science through the use of the mythic, or to use the mythic as a source of alternative or unknown or advanced science, or to use the mythic as a hinge to elaborate a difference between one kind of sf and another” (“On the Mythologerm”²¹ 437). All three uses may be identified in greater or lesser degree in the texts considered here; for instance, in the Shonku stories where alternative science based on forgotten “eastern” knowledges and ingredients triumph over their “western” counterparts. The charge of this concept, however, aligns more directly with elements from the body of religio-cultural literary texts identified as “Hindu” and less commonly, from Islamic lore. The inclusion of reworked mythological

²¹ This essay post-dates the writing of much of this dissertation and I have therefore not utilized the concept of the mythologerm to any great degree, but the three ways in which myths are activated in *kalpabigyan*, namely, “to draw parallels and continuities between the present and a mythical past, to satirize or critically appraise the mythic as a repository of cultural values, which in turn can be used to satirize the culture itself, or to bolster cultural/national pride by turning myth into pseudo-history or reading myth as history” are present in my analysis in the chapters that follow (“Introduction”, *Indian Genre Fiction*).

elements in *kalpabigyan*, on the one hand, “serves as culturally and politically inflected reference points, differentiating it from SF produced elsewhere” and accounting for its “unique flavor”; on the other, it acts as a “constraint” and a culturally estranging factor which makes it “less (globally) portable” (“Introduction”, *Indian Genre Fiction*).

Another, and in my reading, a far larger “constraint” on the global portability of *kalpabigyan* is however its reliance on directly drawing major components of its storyworld from contemporary social realities and power-structures in Bengal and India. In this, I am in agreement with Gayatri Spivak’s assessment of translation praxis (not least because these texts, too, come to the “western” reader in translation), that the reader (belonging to another culture) must make the effort to grasp “(t)he history of the language [and] the history of the author’s moment”, also from external sources (“The Politics of Translation” 403). Without this effort, which needs to be programmatically articulated for “third world” literatures in general²², it would be only too easy to dismiss *kalpabigyan* as fantastical rehashings of mythology, where in fact, its use here is rarely unmediated or by default.

My own “definition” of SF in general and *kalpabigyan* in particular has evolved during the writing of this dissertation, and given the multiplicity of voices in the field, that is only to be expected. While initially I found Malmgren’s typology useful, it’s limitations became clearer as the category of Science Fantasy, which would be the overarching rubric, with its thematic thrust towards the “epistemological and ontological”, fell short of being adequate analytical tools as I turned to investigate the scientificity (ie. “the conditions determining what is considered scientific activity”) within the texts (*Bangla Kalpabigyan*, 40). I have found Freedman’s

²² Or, as Partha Chatterjee puts it, “if history students all over the world could read about daily life in a single village in the French province of Languedoc in the 14th century or about the mental world of a solitary Italian miller in the 16th century, then in principle there is no reason why they should not do the same with a book about subaltern life in a village or small town in south Asia” (“After Subaltern Studies”, 49).

“cognition effect” a more useful analytical tool as it simultaneously points to a rational framework for the explication of the novum, while recognizing the ambiguities present in delimiting both “science” and “estrangement”. So the first axiom when attempting to identify a text as SF or not, is, in my view, a condition where the framework of the novum’s explication must be validated by some sort of rationalistic discourse; the novum itself, too, may or may not be purely technoscientific and contain elements of myth or magic. Myth, if re-inscribed within a rationalist discourse, for instance, as Ray’s Shonku stories or Mukhodahyay’s utopias do, by evoking the “current state of human science isn’t advanced enough” adage, would then fall within the broad generic parameters of SF.

The second axiom would be identifying a Wittgensteinian “web of resemblances”, as opposed to discrete or singular elements that mark a text as SF; in this, the role of the constantly mutating SF megatext²³ is becoming increasingly crucial as newer elements are introduced from around the world. The SF megatext could be called the field of the afterlife of the novum, in the sense of familiarity engendered by overuse; for instance, nuclear apocalypse or the time machine have largely lost their “newness”; but remain in current SF as part of a “web of resemblances”, or as settings for the introduction of “newer” novums. Here, Raymond Williams’ formulation of the “dominant”, the “residual” and the “emergent” is useful in understanding the processes of flux within the SF megatext (*Marxism and Literature* 121-27). Specific elements in the megatext go through phases of greater or lesser popularity/use, depending on the sorts of crises in contemporary society, the commercial success of certain texts and so on. An interesting instance

²³ The SF megatext is “the huge body of established moves or reading protocols that the reader learns through immersion in many hundreds of sf short stories and novels (and, with significantly less sophistication, from movies, television episodes, and games). The sf megatext comprises a virtual encyclopedia and specialized dictionary. For a story to be effective sf, it is insufficient that it invoke futuristic or extraterrestrial locales in ignorance of those narrative constraints or opportunities that already exist. These are embodied in science fiction’s century and more of imagined worlds and their inhabitants, created via specific rhetorical moves, tools and lexicons” (“SF Megatext”).

comes from the Hunger Games or Maze Runner type of storyworld, where “underdog” contestants must fight to the death in a futuristic/corporate-owned/post-apocalyptic scenario, which may be traced back to Kousan Takami’s *Battle Royale* (1999). *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-2010; film versions 2012-2015), has an interesting and not-internationally-known precursor in *23 hours 60 minutes* and its sequel *60 minutes 23 hours* by Anish Deb, pegged as “the longest futuristic thriller in Bangla”. Deb, who started writing it in 2004 for *pujabarshiki Kishor Bharati*, found it “growing shamelessly” till he was able to complete the first part in 2010 and the second in 2014 (Author’s Preface, *23 hours 60 minutes*). Deb credits his storyworld to the nefarious potential implicit in “reality TV”, which has, since the late 2000’s, become somewhat of a scourge to the TV-consuming public (at least in the US and India). But this particular configuration has, arguably, also rubbed off much of its “newness” and become a part of the SF megatext, for instance, as found in Md. Jafar Iqbal’s 2017 *Ritin* and several recent anime like *Log Horizon*, *Ousama Game* and *Kaiji*. Thus, as the SF megatext continues to grow and recycle tropes and motifs, the novum functions in a dialectical tension with it—while common elements help identify a SF story as SF, authors are usually careful to set the dominant novum or novum clusters apart.

Given the centrality of science itself in SF narratives, whether by privileging the aspect of cognition or cognition effect, or considering technoscience as the paradigmatic framework for “newness”, or even considering linkages between different elements in a “web of resemblances” shaped by, and shaping, the SF megatext, I now turn to an investigation of scientificity itself, ie. how what we recognize as science comes about.

CRITICAL CONCEPTS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS III

History and Philosophy of Science

In this section²⁴, I will first discuss some core tenets of constructivism, an outlook that “regards scientific knowledge primarily as a human product, made with locally situated cultural and material resources, rather than as simply the revelation of a pre-given order of nature” (Golinski ix). The constructivists’ proposed concepts, such as Ludwick Fleck’s “thought styles”, “thought collectives”, “esoteric and exoteric circles”; Thomas Kuhn’s “paradigm shifts”, “normal” and “revolutionary” science and Bruno Latour’s “actor-network” theory, were instrumental in re-conceiving the function and role of science against the “classical” Enlightenment view of science as “empirical”, “objective” “advancing knowledge and civilization” in “positivistic progress” and supported by the “idea of an universal scientific method” (Golinski 2-5). By considering social factors, ranging from peer-pressure to industry interests, constructivists concur that *knowledge production is socially conditioned*. Historically, constructivism has faced the damaging charge of “generalized relativism”, but has also enabled new approaches to the investigation of what science is, and how it comes to be (Golinski xi). The constructivist turn in science studies is pertinent for SF in general, as it provides analytical tools to examine the science in SF, quite apart from specific plot iterations (corrupt corporations/governments doing unethical science) and/or character stereotypes (mad scientists).

²⁴ Some analytical trajectories in this section are culled from Chattopadhyay’s dissertation *Bangla Kalpabigyan* (35-48; 71-82). Since my goal here is literary analysis, I do not discuss examples from scientific practice, for instance, Fleck’s fascinating study on syphilis. Nor do I discuss other major contributors to the field, such as David Bloor, Barry Barnes and Harry Collins (“strong programme” of the sociology of knowledge).

While acknowledging that different cultures might perceive a “fact” differently (incommensurability, Fleck and Kuhn) and examining networks via which local knowledge becomes global knowledge (Latour), they do not however offer much on specific colonial or postcolonial contexts. For this, I turn to the work of George Basalla, Roy McLeod, Dhruv Raina, Irfan Habib, Meera Nanda and other Indian postcolonial historiographers of science and technology. As India, in particular, had a “great tradition” of pre-colonial scientific activity, negotiations between “western” and “indigenous” science becomes crucial in the colonial context, and this preoccupation carries over into the post-Independence period as well.

The Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact (1935) by Ludwik Fleck²⁵, prefigures many arguments forwarded by later SSK (Sociology of Scientific Knowledge) theorists. He proposes two crucial concepts: the thought collective (*Denkkollektiv*) and thought style (*Denkstil*). A thought collective consists of “a community of persons mutually exchanging ideas...[it] provides the special carrier for the historical development of any field of thought [and] for the given stock of knowledge and level of culture” (39) . A thought style, “characterized by common features in the problems of interest to a thought collective”, is however both a means and a constraint to cognition (Fleck 99). Cognition is similarly a “social activity”: “What is already known influences the particular method of cognition; and cognition...enlarges, renews, and gives fresh meaning to what is already known” (Fleck 38). Facts are also socially and historically conditioned: they are a “signal of resistance to arbitrary thought” and “*in line with the intellectual interests of its thought collective*” (emphasis in the original; 101). Thus Fleck argues (prefiguring Latour), that the more interconnected and

²⁵ Ludwik Fleck was a Polish medical doctor and immunologist. He was incarcerated in Auschwitz and Buchenwald concentration camps, 1942-45, and his work remained virtually unknown to the Anglophone world till it was translated, with a foreword by Thomas Kuhn, in 1979.

specialized a branch of knowledge becomes the more certain and solid its “facts” appear to be, and vice versa (102).

This leads to two general implications relevant to SF. Firstly, that different thought styles may well be incommensurable, as “truth” is “completely determined within a thought style”; so if A and B belong to different thought collectives, the “truth” will “just *not* be the *same* thought” for both of them (emphasis in the original, 100). For instance, we see this incommensurability principle explored when Ghana-da encounters technoscientifically “primitive” peoples who interpret a lunar eclipse as the moon god being angry or even when Mukhopadhyay’s *adbhature* series gives equal ontological status to ghosts, humans and aliens. Secondly, prefiguring Raymond Williams’ configuration of the dominant, residual and emergent, (significant as argued earlier regarding genre emergence and the SF megatext) Fleck argues for an interconnectedness and historicity of thought styles, which “leave remnants” and contain “evolutionary development of various elements from another style”—for instance, “astrologers and magicians [are] eccentrics who associate with the uneducated of the lower social classes or become charlatans”, as seen in chapter V (*Marxism and Literature* 121-27; Fleck 100).

Interconnectedness and historicity within thought collectives also creates circles of “esoteric” specialists and “exoteric” non-specialists, where individual members of an esoteric circle simultaneously belong to several other exoteric circles, such as race, class, nation etc. , somewhat similar to how different generic elements interact with each other (Fleck 45). Ideally, these overlapping circles have a democratic, self- correcting function, where exoteric circles must not only accept but also assent to the knowledge claims of esoteric circles (Harwood 180). Generally, in SF as in our experienced world, “esoteric” circles consists of scientists, scientific institutions and their modes of knowledge dissemination in scholarly journals and conferences

(represented in Shonku and Nat Boltu series), and “exoteric” circles consist of knowledgeable non-specialists educated by textbook and popular science (represented in Ghana-da series). Textbook and popular science consolidate “fact” by stripping it of its historicity, remaining silent on the attendant clashes between thought styles, and presenting it as a rounded and solid “truth” (113). In the Ghana-da series, especially, “fact” becomes “novum” to the readers and the narratees/listeners due to a contextual rupture in the long interconnected chain of consolidation of popular science— Ghana-da and his four listeners/narratees belong equally to exoteric circles, but Ghana-da bridges both intellectual and physical distance from the esoteric “center” through his encyclopedic and updated knowledge of various specializations.

Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1979) proposes a set of concepts somewhat complementary to Fleck’s; for Kuhn, “normal” scientific activity depends on a “paradigm” , until such time when it is discredited by a competing paradigm in a “revolutionary” way. Paradigms are “universally recognized scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners” (viii). Normal science utilizes a process of puzzle-solving to produce increasingly specialized knowledge in accord with the tenets of the particular paradigm, while “anomalies” are either ignored or reinterpreted to fit within the paradigm. Paradigms can never be fully known; instead, its “research problems and techniques...relate by resemblance and by modeling to one or another part of the scientific corpus which the community in question already recognizes as among its established achievements” (44-6). Over time, normal science reaches a crisis, when ever increasing numbers of anomalies cannot be accounted for and this causes a paradigm shift. A paradigm shift is what Kuhn calls a “scientific revolution”.

The revolution, however, cannot happen unless a rival paradigm is present. The new, rival paradigm gains acceptance among practitioners gradually and opens up new fields of discovery and specialization (Kuhn 159). However, some elements of the anterior paradigm continue to be retained, and successive paradigms also share methodological similarities/ a “disciplinary matrix” in terms of values such as accuracy, consistency, social usefulness, simplicity and fruitfulness (182-5). For instance, the clash between “normal” and “revolutionary” science is indicated, but not fully realized, in Shonku’s scientific practice— Shonku uses tenets and ingredients from both “western” and “indigenous” sciences to invent gadgets and medicines, but cannot, finally, produce a full-fledged rival paradigm based on “indigenous” science and lead to revolutionizing “normal” science, as he remains extremely secretive about his methods and sources, and subverts any shared values between “disciplinary matrices”.

In his later work, Kuhn moves away from a linear progression from “normal” science to “revolutionary science” to the “new normal”, and analyzes incommensurability as “methodological” and “taxonomic”, where the former proposes that “there are no shared, objective standards of scientific theory appraisal, so that there are no external or neutral standards that univocally determine the comparative evaluation of competing theories” (“The Incommensurability of Scientific Theories”). This axiom has been widely contested on relativistic charges. Taxonomic incommensurability, on the other hand, arises from the clash between lexicons, when speakers do not use the same vocabulary or terminology to refer to the same thing. Comparable to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, Kuhn argues that a lexicon constitutes the objects of knowledge (see Comrie, “Incommensurability”). He posits that scientific advancement, instead of a linear progression, results in the branching out of sub-disciplines, which develop mutually exclusive lexicons where referents are subject to different sets of natural

laws, leading to incoherence and miscommunication. For instance, “planets orbit the sun” would be incoherent in Ptolemaic vocabulary, where the sun is considered a planet and planets orbit the earth. His proposed solution is that instead of translating between lexicons, one must become bilingual (“Incommensurability”).

Taxonomic incommensurability may be seen, for instance, in the differing lexicons used by the historian Duru, the chief-mother of the Kafram clan and two women of the Kafram clan in Mitra’s novel *Manu Dwadosh*, regarding the series of apocalypses that have produced a barren and radioactive earth (chapter IV). Their incompatible lexicons also differ significantly from the vocabulary that western technoscientific SF uses for the same things. A telling example is the disjuncture between “sage” (*rishi* or *taposh*) and “scientist”, where the former is, presumably, trained in both spiritual and material practices, while the latter only in material sciences, echoing the dialectical tension between *gyan* and *bigyan* in the formation of *kalpabigyan*, as Chattopadhyay proposes. The estranged lexicon also points to a rupture between our present time in the seventh Manu cycle and the far-future world of *Manu Dwadosh* during the twelfth Manu cycle, with the condition of possibility of an altogether different worldview/ idea of scientificity.

Bruno Latour’s *Science in Action* (1987) draws upon and modifies some of these earlier constructivist ideas. Depicting science as Janus-faced—“science has two faces: one that knows, the other that does not know yet”—he maps their opposing tendencies; for instance “Once the machine works people will be convinced” versus “The machine will work when all the relevant people are convinced” (“Janus’ third dictum”) and “When things are true they hold” versus “When things hold they start becoming true” (“Janus’ fourth dictum”) (Latour 7-12). Latour shows, by literally “following scientists through society”, how scientific rhetoric works to increase the credibility of a scientific theory; the most successful scientific theories are those

which garner the largest number of authoritative supporters. This however, does not mean that scientific discourse is purely rhetorical; it also utilizes critical “nondiscursive resources”, such as instruments in a laboratory (Golinski 38).

The longer the network, the more truthful/solid its facts and machines appear to be, and reading human *and* non-human agency²⁶ in a network leads to a deeper understanding of how “local” knowledge becomes “global technoscience”. For Latour, there is no clear distinction between science and technology, and the network is characterized as an amalgamation of both-technoscience. By enrolling human and non-human actants in heterogeneous configurations²⁷, technoscientific artifacts extend across both space and time, often in tightly encoded “black boxes”— instruments that are accepted as working machines, passed between users, and over time, stripped of initial controversies around the point of origin and taken for granted, so long as they remain in circulation (Latour 137; Golinski 39). When a technoscientific artifact is “black-boxed”, it is no longer necessary for its users to figure out how the thing actually works.

Three elements of Latour’s actor-network theory are particularly relevant for SF and kalpabigyan. First, reinterpreting the “black box” concept: in the Shonku and Nat Boltu stories, these two scientists, while participating in an international scientific network, simultaneously rupture the progress of technoscience by black-boxing and *not* sharing their inventions and gadgets. Shonku’s *miracurool* (miracle-cure-for-all-ailments) and *anhillinin* (annihilates-everything), particularly, are used numerous times by his friends, but do not enter the network, causing a rupture. Second, the idea that non-human artifacts can have equal agency: this is

²⁶ Ascribing equal agency to human and non-human actants in a network (actor-network theory) remains a controversial issue in STS, and Latour has elucidated it in his later work with Micahel Callon and S. Woolgar. But I will not discuss the theoretical nuances here.

²⁷ For instance, “Louis Pasteur had to learn to control both bacterial cultures (which required an appropriate nutrient medium to grow in his Paris laboratory) and provincial farmers concerned about outbreaks of anthrax (who were persuaded by publicity and carefully staged demonstrations that Pasteur could help them)” (Golinski 39; Latour 123-27).

especially interesting when it comes to human-independent scientific activity— machine intelligence (AI, robots, androids), or cases where the science is simply beyond human comprehension. In the first Shonku story “The Diary of a Space Farer” we find both: a robot that has a sarcastic mind of its own that transcends the scientist’s programming, and the aliens of Tafa whose science is at a level where Shonku’s scientific experiments are simple entrainment for them. The imagination of non-human scientific activity indicates a field of knowledge production that is cognitively valid but materially unachieved or unachievable. This leads back to the science in SF as “imaginary science”, as Istvan Csicsery-Ronay discusses in *The Seven Beauties* or as Stanislaw Lem puts it,

[T]he social, psychological, political, and economic problems of space travel may be depicted quite realistically in science fiction even though the technological parameters of the spaceships described are quite fantastic in the sense that it will for all eternity be impossible to build a spaceship with such parameters. (Lem 37)

So, even if humans can never “for all eternity” built spaceships that travel through wormholes, to use just one pervasive SF trope, the very fact that humans are able to imagine the idea from recent developments in theoretical physics points to an expansion of a rational, “potential cognitive tendency” explored by Suvin (*Metamorphoses* 6). Indeed, sometimes the imagination is more potent than the “fact”, as in the case of time travel, which has quite conclusively been proved impossible, but which continues to reappear within the SF megatext. And because SF cannot fully assimilate the non-human technoscientific and/or alien other within its scientific discourse, the focus shifts back to a consideration of ethics, for instance, as illustrated by Asimov’s Three laws of Robotics²⁸, which has become a staple within the megatext.

²⁸ Asimov’s Three Laws of Robotics are:

A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.

Third, the movement from “local” knowledge to “global technoscience”: while Latour’s study mainly considers the isolated (European) laboratory as “local”, the idea can be expanded to include how neoliberal, late-capitalist technoscience, as the cultural claim of the “white” “west”, consumes and incorporates other knowledges, particularly “indigenous”, “peripheral” or “non-western” knowledges, in its unstoppable path to perfect and complete material knowledge about the world. Discourses that resist incorporation within this march of technoscientific progress are disbelieved (like the Dinkas’ and Shilooks’ stories about the *abu laheeb* in Jorkens story “Abu Laheeb”), ignored (like some of Shonku’s inventions) or ridiculed (like religion, myth and pseudoscience).

George Basalla’s widely critiqued but still powerfully pervasive three-phase diffusionist model, provides another approach to this movement in colonial and postcolonial constructions of scientificity. In “The Spread of Western Science” (1967), Basalla proposes the model:

During “phase 1” the nonscientific society or nation provides a source for European science. “Phase 2” is marked by a period of colonial science, and “phase 3” completes the process of transplantation with a struggle to achieve an independent scientific tradition (or culture). (Basalla 611)

This model subtends much of my literary analysis in the chapters that follow, so I briefly enumerate the characteristics that Basalla ascribes to these three phases. In Phase I, “the nonscientific society or nation provides a source for European science” via “geographical exploration and appraisal of natural resources”, which, while contributing to revolutionizing Western²⁹ science at home, remain mere objects of study. In Phase II, which occurs also in

A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.

A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Laws. (Asimov, 40)

²⁹ I have retained Basalla’s use of *Western* over my preferred use “*western*” here, as his use does not suffer from any ambiguity of meaning, referring to Western Europe.

places that are *not* formally colonized, “colonial science” struggles to set up its own institutions or dominate in established areas of scientific enquiry, while the “colonial scientist” remains dependent on Western science, trains within Western scientific traditions and seeks to validate his research via affiliation to Western scientific institutions and journals. Finally, in Phase III, “colonial, dependent scientific culture is to be exchanged for an independent one” and this calls for a number of social and cultural reforms, such as supplanting older philosophical traditions (Confucianism in China), extolling the virtues of manual labor (in Brazil where noblemen found it denigrating to set up their own experiments), clarifying government policy vis-à-vis science (in Japan), including scientific curricula in the education system and promoting technological growth and international channels of communication between scientists. For Basalla, it is not until all the tasks of phase III have been implemented, that “peripheries” become “independent” of Western scientific influence.

In response to Basalla’s diffusionist model in “On Visiting the ‘Moving Metropolis’”, Roy Macleod presents six rebuttals and posits an alternative five-part “impressionistic taxonomy...of the main phases of British imperial science between c.1780 and 1939”—“Metropolitan Science”, “Colonial Science”, “Federation”, “Efficient Imperialism” and “Empire and Commonwealth” (229). For him, “metropolitan science” is a way of *doing* science predicated on the discourses of enlightenment rationality; “colonial science” is, from the point of view of the metropole, “low science” and fact-gathering, which may or may not be “intellectually derivative” when viewed from the colony; and “imperial science” is perceived as a “spirit of power and service” from the center and a “spirit of cooperation” from the periphery. He then argues that the mature phase of “imperial science” creates a set of dynamic centers and peripheries by co-opting science produced at the latter, while maintaining the vocabulary and

universalist claims of metropolitan science. The political and cultural hegemonies of the metropole however allowed few colonials to recognize the “power they enjoyed over the center” and “instances in which the institutions and leadership in Britain were *dependent* upon colonial discovery and enterprise” (emphasis in the original 243; for a detailed reading of some examples, see Raina “Reconfiguring the Centre”). The “moving metropolis” thus becomes “a function of empire, selecting [and] cultivating intellectual and economic frontiers” (245). In another essay, “Reading the Discourse of Colonial Science”, MacLeod more clearly reformulates Basalla’s one-way diffusion of science as a “two-way relationship - between the histories of natural science as given, or lent, or appropriated or stolen; between producers of knowledge and their clients; between producers of technologies and their consumers”, and reasserts that “ ‘knowledge sites’ not only exist throughout the world, but also produce hybrids and ambivalences which are part of a wider cultural identity” (90; see also Baber).

The tension between Basalla’s pervasive model and MacLeod’s rebuttal facilitates a reading of the dual and opposed tendencies in SF and *kalpabigyan*. Basalla’s blatant Orientalist and positivistic leanings are obvious in statements like “China, India, and Japan posed new *problems* for the spread of Western science. Ancient and civilized peoples inhabited these nations, not the *primitives* encountered elsewhere” or “commerce did not supply the major impulse [for European colonization. The European scientist] is the heir to the Scientific Revolution” (emphasis mine, 612). Such ideology clearly informs, for instance, the cultural superiority of a fictional tall-teller like Jorkens, who considers himself, and is considered by his peers, the unquestioned pioneer of “Science” in encountering “primitive” societies and cultures.

MacLeod’s moving metropole concept, however, allows us to position Ghana-da’s application of scientific tenets as a function of “imperial science”, even though he belongs to a

colonized culture which has yet to achieve scientific independence. Again, the “postcolonial anxiety” suffered by Shonku and Nat Boltu derives from “colonial science”, but it simultaneously produces “hybrids and ambivalences” in their scientific practice. Shonku and Nat Boltu, incidentally, receive little support from their fellow Bengali, Indian or Asian counterparts and science policies of their regional or national governments. Consider, for instance, NASA and CIA’s (neoliberal-neocolonial) support for Nat Boltu’s scientific activity, or the case of Satyajit Ray, who was initially an enthusiast of Nehruvian science and upheld some of the same philosophical worldviews as Nehru, but chose to create a lonely scientist protagonist in an anachronistic and romanticized 19th century mould (for a reading of Ray’s films as a critique of Nehruvian politics, see Suman Ghosh).

Indeed, the idea that “science has no nation; but nations have science” pervades European nationalism and Orientalism equally (“Reading the Discourse of Colonial Science” 87). Bengal, historically at the forefront of the colonial encounter, responded to “western science” in various ways. Briefly, there were three concurrent processes in the regulation of science in colonial Bengal (and India): absorption, where a “kind of scientific activity became part of the social space”; combination, where indigenous cultural traditions were allied to western scientific practice; and transformation, where scientific activity was “modified to suit cultural and nationalist intent” (*Bangla Kalpabigyan* 81-82). These trajectories (in the colonial era) have been studied extensively by scholars such as Gyan Prakash, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Ashis Nandy, Irfan Habib, Romila Thapar and others, so I will not explore them here, but instead provide a brief overview of history of science in postcolonial India, ending with Meera Nanda’s critique of relativism leading to a rise of “Hindu science” in the contemporary context.

The idea of an “Indian” science for an independent India was still often in response to continued Orientalist ideologies, especially the “materialist west- spiritual east” binary. Dhruv Raina argues that during the “postcolonial reworking of the past”, science, on the one hand, was seen as a function of state power: establishment for a cohesive network of state-funded scientific institutions, national research agendas and their linkages with industry in a socialist, developmental paradigm (“Evolving Perspectives” 9; Suranjan Das, “The Nehru Years” 15-19). Nehru was its proponent. Nehruvian science is another topic on which much scholarly study exists, but in short, while it was “committed to redressing such basic social problems as ill health and poverty”, by the 1970’s the failure of the model was apparent especially vis-à-vis developmental projects (big dams, deforestation) and state capitalism promoted by Indian industrialists such as G.D. Birla, J.R.D. Tata and A.D. Shroff, which “polemicalised [and] eroded the public image” of state-backed science, “without in any way denting state support for science” (Arnold 361, 366; “Decolonization and Entangled Histories” 188; see also “The Nehru Years”).

On the other hand, science, as part of cultural matrix in academic-institutionalized worldview, was channeled in various philosophical directions, some of them influenced by STS. For Nehru, science was both “universal and national”; the “‘culture of science’ gave India pride in its past, but also the intellectual authority and resources to be an active and equal participant in the present-day domain of science” (Arnold 363). In contrast, proponents of the Marxist tradition, like Debiprasad Chattopadhyay, argued that it was time to “unveil the scientific and technical core of the ‘spiritual civilization’” that was India in its Orientalist image (“Evolving Perspectives”, 9). Debiprasad Chattopadhyay, from his study of philosophical schools such as Nyāya, argued that “the only discipline in the ancient Indian world that could be counted as a science was medicine”, privileged science as a “high-cultural activity” and proposed that the

caste-system and the rupture it caused between theoretical and practical knowledge was responsible for the non-occurrence of any scientific revolution in India³⁰ (“Evolving Perspectives”, 10). Alternatively, neo-Gandhians “mounted a civilisational-national critique of the West” where “an alternate science would stem forth from rural India, possibly from womenfolk agitating for a more ecologically sound order” and posited “other possible and equally likely worlds that had been condemned to the underground of both India as well as the modern West” (“Evolving Perspectives 15; Nandy, Visvanathan and Uberoi cited in “Decolonization” 189; see also Vandana Shiva). In contrast to academic-institutionalized viewpoints on what science ought to be in postcolonial India, in the early 1970’s, a series of peoples’ science movements broke out of institutional enclaves; a whole generation of students trained in the sciences in India and abroad spearheaded mushrooming movements across the country to spread a “scientific temper”, but were widely critiqued for hegemonizing “all forms of rationality and claims to truth” (Evolving Perspectives”, 16).

This brings us nearly full circle back to the universalist and rationalist claims of science, and two pressing problems in the current Indian context. First, the dispelling of superstitions and false beliefs amongst the masses, encouraging them to challenge traditionally entrenched and often oppressive worldviews through basic science education that popular science movements try to accomplish; and second, the rise of religious fundamentalist views of alternative ethnosciences like “Vedic science”, made possible by constructivist theorizations that wittingly or unwittingly contribute to a further entrenchment of traditional authority.

³⁰ Earlier, Prafulla Chandra Ray, chemist and founder of India’s first pharmaceutical company Bengal Chemicals, had made a similar materialist argument regarding chemistry in his *A History of Hindu Chemistry from the Earliest Times to the Middle of Sixteenth Century* (1902), but Ray had to “locate the causes of the *decline of the scientific spirit* in ancient India, outside the proximate realm of scientific practice itself” (“Evolving Perspectives”, 8).

In a powerful critique of constructivism, the Strong Programme and the alternative-ethnoscience approaches of Indian theorists (particularly Ashish Nandy and Vandana Shiva), Meera Nanda rejects as “epistemic charity” the constructivist vision that all ways of knowing are equally valid. She argues:

[T]he project of different and equal sciences for different people completely negates our project of science for all people. We prefer our much-maligned universalistic project because we are not interested in a supposed cognitive equality of different cultures but, rather, in substantive equality for all people in terms of healthier, fuller, and freer lives. We prefer the cold, objective facts of science to the comfortable, situated knowledge of our ancestors for the simple reason that we refuse to subordinate what is good to what is ours. (“The Epistemic Charity” 1998, 299)

According to Nanda, scientific rationality as a “result of more open and critical inquiry” of the phenomenal world as knowable, and generation of facts “backed by good, falsifiable reasons” is vastly preferable to, for example, extolling the indigenous method of smallpox variolation accompanied by prayers to the goddess of smallpox, Sitala Devi, which is “10 times more likely to actually cause the disease as compared to the modern [cowpox-based] vaccine” (291, 296). While it is laudable that social scientists recognize the epistemological basis of an indigenous belief-system or the “gift of ethnoscience”, implementing the traditional method significantly diminishes the possibility and quality of life. By conflating the ideologies and social practices of western civilization with the methodological principles of modern science such as observation and experiment leading to a “better approximation of reality”, Indian apologists of constructivism throw the baby out with the bath water (292). So while these “‘alternative universals’ grounded in indigenous categories, cultural idioms, and traditions” boost patriotic and nationalistic morale among intellectuals, they do a great disservice to the masses (291).

In *Prophets Facing Backward* (2003), Nanda mounts a similarly potent objection against the relativist tenets of constructivism, this time addressing the unholy nexus between

proponents³¹ of alterative ethnosciences and the rise of religious-fundamentalist notion of “Vedic science” in India (and “Islamic science” in Pakistan). Proponents of this Hindu communitarian “science” argue that the ancient Hindu sages had already discovered everything from airplanes to nuclear fission; the problem is that these ancient “inventions” correspond directly with the discoveries of modern science (*Prophets*; see also Walia). To combat this, Nanda concludes that Indian intellectuals must follow Ambedkar’s vision for a “rationalization and secularization of the cultural common sense”, firstly, by recognizing that “modernity *does* have an essence”, ie. secularization, which would remove God from the domain of the profane and free the Indian people from the mercy of magicians and charlatans, and secondly, to “rediscover the vocation of all intellectuals: to agitate on behalf of universal values” (266-7)³².

Nanda’s fears have largely come true today. The victory of the BJP at the center in 2014, establishment of institutions such as Mararishi Vedic Science department, prominent scientists at the India Science Congress claiming that ancient “India had 40-engine inter-planetary planes” and had discovered batteries and a virus that could turn cow excreta to gold, popularity of spiritual and political figureheads such as Baba Ramdev and Yogi Adityanath who propagate religious myths in the guise of science and secularism, or even the recent comments from a Rajasthan High Court judge that “peacocks reproduce from tears and cow urine prevents ageing”, all point to a rise of an anti-scientific temper in contemporary India (see news articles by Walia; Anand and Bedi).

³¹ Maureen Linker finds overblown Nanda’s claim that American-educated Indian scholars flocked to constructivism to advance their careers and wallow in postcolonial victimhood, and says that Nanda’s analysis is “a classic case of temporal correlation without demonstrated causality” (Linker 454). Clifford Geertz agrees that matters are “more complicated than that”.

³² It appears that Ashis Nandy has taken up this task (for instance, see “Smriti Irani would've justified jailing Tagore for his nationalism”), but with reservations; see “Ashish Nandy willing to apologise in SC for his article on Gujarat written in 2008”.

Fortunately, violent Hindu fundamentalism did not rear its ugly head in Marxist-era West Bengal, and all the kalpabigyan authors considered in this dissertation were concerned, in greater or lesser degree, with the dissemination of the Constitutionally-ratified “scientific temper” in their fictional and non-fictional writings. Within the fictional storyworlds in the Ghana-da, Shonku and Nat Boltu series, implementing tenets from alternative ethnoscience or borrowing concepts from pseudoscience / techno-occult *never* becomes an impediment for an egalitarian vision of culture and society. The use of pseudoscience and techno-occult (for instance, Daniken’s Ancient Astronaut Theory found in both Shonku and Nat Boltu series) point back to the ruptures within “western” scientificity, without necessarily posing a cohesive body of “eastern” knowledge to counter it. Instead, like “cultural amphibians” (borrowing the term from Said), these protagonists negotiate and balance between the best of both worlds (“Facts, configurations”, 1-16).

Scientificity is, indeed, more directly mapped in the first three chapters of this dissertation, primarily because of the great degree of verisimilitude between the fictional worlds of the three series and the “real” world. The protagonists of the three adventure series behave in manner remarkably verisimilar to real-world producers and disseminators of scientific knowledge and networks of knowledge production, while also underscoring radical breaks within networks. These linkages are less central in the fourth and fifth chapters, owing to their worldbuilding as estranged yet familiar-in-the-basic template dystopia and eutopia (respectively) and also because the mechanisms of knowledge production are not represented closely. In *Manu Dwadosh* (chapter IV), while the scientific historians form a three-person “thought collective”, there are breaks in consensus between them, and in any case they are unable to disseminate their scientific methods or findings via any network, clashing instead with the opposed belief systems

of “lived-practical” and “mythic” worldviews, which have significant plot ramifications. Similarly, in the four eutopias in chapter V, while there is some recognition that scientific activity and networks exist outside of their strictly delimited space-time bubbles, these are absent, forgotten, alien in nature or completely reversed by interpenetration with the “superstitious”. This, for example, gives rise to ironic hybrids like a scientist’s ghost or Bigyan-lok, a realm of the afterlife absent in Hindu cosmogony, but imaginatively depicted as home to prominent scientists irrespective of religion, underscoring the spirit of inclusivity that characterizes Mukhopadhyay’s *adbhuture* series overall. Therefore, I have focused more on the clash of general worldviews and broad belief-systems in these two chapters, instead of closely examining the mechanisms of scientific production there.

CRITICAL CONCEPTS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS IV

Rasa Theory

Moving on now to the question of how kalpabigyan engages with its indigenous literary traditions and aesthetic approaches, I draw upon a framework derived from the rasa theory that has informed a long tradition of poetic and dramatic literature in India. Rasa—variously translated as “juice, taste, emotion, pleasure, essence” etc.; following Chari, I prefer “aesthetic relish”—is the very soul of poetry: the end-goal and aspiration of any literary text (according to the Sanskrit tradition as well as its diffused continuities in *bhasa* literature today) (Prasad 2).

While previous SF criticism has utilized both historical and scientific perspectives as lens for reading SF, no attention has hitherto been paid to Indian genre fiction (broadly) vis-à-vis rasa theory. This is surprising, because genre fiction (at least in Bangla with which I am more familiar than the other bhasa), has invented critical-descriptive categories like “adventure rasa” and refers to “rasa” and “*rasika*” (ie. “one who can savour rasa”), as frequently or more often than highbrow, canonical or mainstream fiction. Another case in point is the naming of the kalpabigyan-exclusive magazines published between 1960’s-80’s—*Vismay* (*Amazement*), *Fantastic* and *Ascharja* (*Strange*), all of which point squarely to a rasa identification of the dominant emotive states evoked by the fiction they published. The very retention of these old terms indicates a cognizance on part of both authors and readers of a shared set of cultural-aesthetic values, setting kalpabigyan apart from whatever processes of translation, adaptation or “borrowing” from western sources that also shape it.

In this section, I first provide a short literary history of rasa poetics over nearly two millennia up until the colonial era. Next, I explore three core principles of “how rasa works” and argue that they lend the theory a wide applicability beyond its immediate context. In the third section, I explore “what rasa is” by outlining building blocks from the classical works of Bharata (early centuries CE), Anandavardhana (c. 820-890) and Abhinavagupta (c. 950-1016), and from the five-part structure of the Bhakti rasas formulated by Rupa Goswami (1489–1564)³³. As I have discussed specific applications of the rasas in the following chapters, I only include here a few general comments on *adbhuta* (wonderful) rasa, which I argue is typically central to the emotive response in kalpabigyan.

A short history of Sanskrit poetry and poetics³⁴

In Sanskrit poetics, *sāhitya* or poetry/literature is broadly grouped into *nāṭya* or *drisya kāvya* (poetry-seen), ie. drama and *śravya kāvya* (poetry-heard), ie. stanzaic poetry or prose, each with its sub-classifications, like the ten types of drama, along with mixed forms combining meter and prose like *campu*, and predominantly prose forms like *kathā* and *ākhyāika*. By the first century CE, Sanskrit poetics had emerged into two core disciplines, *alamkara-sastra* (study of literary ornaments/figures of speech) and *nāṭya-sāstra* (study of drama) with eight schools: Rasa (Emotive/Pleasure), *Alamkāra* (Figures of speech), *Riti* (Style), *Guna/Dosa* (Desirable and undesirable qualities), *Vakrokti* (crooked/oblique speech), *Svabhavokti* (Statement/ description),

³³ An elementary grasp of Sanskrit has allowed me to read some sections of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* in the original. I have used the Masson and Patwardhan text for all quotations, and referred to the Sanskrit text from Kavi and Shastri ed. *Nāṭyaśāstra of Bharatamuni* as well as the Bangla transliteration and translation by Sureshchandra Bandopadhyay et al. *Bharat Nāṭyaśāstra* in 2 volumes, and referred also to the Manomohan Ghosh translation. For Abhinavagupta, Anandavardhana and Rupa Goswami’s theories, I have referred to translations and contemporary commentators in English.

³⁴ Some notes on pronunciation: a as in u in cut-short and only necessary for pronouncing the final consonant, Rama= Ram ; ā as in father; c always soft as in church. For complete list, see “Sanskrit Pronunciation Part I”pp. 1-8.

Aucitya (Propriety) and *Dhvani* (Suggestion) (Gerow). Over two millennia, there were numerous debates and conceptual overlaps between theorizations, but *rasa* and *dhvani* are generally considered to be the most significant among these schools, and contemporary criticism has focused on the theories of *rasa* more than any other school. The number, location and nature of *rasa* have all been subject to rigorous critical debate within the tradition, the specifics of which are beyond the scope of this study, and I discuss only the most significant highlights vis-à-vis their usefulness towards a reading of contemporary texts here.

Bharata's *Natyasastra*, the earliest text, in its sixth chapter dealing with *rasas*, enumerates eight *rasas* characterized in ways which make them suitable for stage performances with appropriate actions, settings and props. While it is difficult to pinpoint the exact critical-historical juncture where Bharata's *rasa* theory aimed primarily at dramatic productions was universally accepted as the guiding principle of poetic works in meter or prose, ie. *sravya kāvya*, critics agree that the transition/comingling was complete by the fourth century CE. This led to a proliferation of the number of *rasas* by later commentators on *sravya kāvya*, which were not strictly limited by the performative aspect. For instance, the controversial ninth *rasa*, *santa* or peaceful, could not be acted on stage as it was the essence of stillness itself, but according to Abhinavagupta, arguably the most influential commentator in the tradition, *santa* *rasa* was to be the emotive culmination of literary texts. Other commentators like Rudrata and Bhoja argued that the number of *rasas* could be theoretically limitless, and many were proposed, but apart from the medieval Bhakti *rasas* none of them gained any long-lasting traction. The location of *rasa*, ie. whether in the poet, character, actor or spectator also came under close scrutiny; however, Abhinavagupta's formulations favoring the spectator held sway within the tradition (see Pollock, Raghavan).

Dhvani, on the other hand, refers to suggestion or resonance relying on semantics; words have a denotative meaning (*abhidhā*), a connotative meaning (*lakshana*) and only after these two primary meanings have been transcended does the composition reach *vyanjanā* or the suggested meaning, the seat of *dhvani*. As such, for Anandavardhana commenting primarily on the function and structure of *sravya kāvya* in his *Dhanvyaloka* (*Light of Suggestion* more often referred to as *Sahridayaloka*) *rasa* as the end-goal of *kāvya* is seamlessly combined with the concept of *dhvani* or suggestion/resonance. For instance, using the word “beauty” numerous times to describe the comeliness of the heroine, fails on both counts of *rasa* and *dhvani*; instead, the descriptions should *suggest* the beautiful nature of the heroine by careful use of detail, such as demeanor, clothing/hairstyle, expressions, attention from suitors etc. which, if executed correctly, should evoke the erotic or *srngāra* *rasa*. The poetic execution of these details, obviously, could be extended much further than what could be performed on stage, but overall Bharata’s first formulations were respectfully adhered to. In this schema, further elaborated upon by Abhinavagupta, *rasa-dhvani* fuse to become the gold standard by which poetry was to be appreciated and evaluated for most of the later Sanskrit tradition.

Despite these rigorous requirements, the fine line between truly inspired poetry illuminated by the poet’s *pratibhā* or creative genius-cum-imagination, and a mere formal parroting of prescribed codes and standard formulae, is difficult to demarcate; so much so that Sanskrit poetry and drama post-Kalidasa (4-5th century) is notorious for needlessly convoluted expression which chokes any pleasure out of it (A. Dutta 2:1109). This was likely exacerbated by traditional notions of propriety or *auchitya*, where only certain subjects were deemed fit for poetry and the focus remained on retelling tales of aristocratic or legendary heroes. Since most of

the content was derived from mythological sources, there was little expectation of entirely new stories, but only new formal expressions.

From the current historical moment of Sanskritised Hindu cultural domination and pandering of “Vedic science”, it would appear that all the critical thought produced in Sanskrit till the seventeenth century was irredeemably religious in nature, but that is not so; there was a distinct separation between the religious and the literary, not to mention other philosophical schools like Nyāya or Mimāṃsa (logic, grammar, ritual semantics as “objective ‘methodologies’ of knowledge, universal, and so secular”, Gerow 214). Religious utterances, as given by the Vedas and Upanishads, were beyond the realm of aesthetic criticism, being fixed in specific aural configurations of the mantras, and chanting them incorrectly was thought to bring more harm than good (Pollock 44). Abhinavagupta’s theorization of *rasa-dhvani*, for instance, is indebted to Advaita Shaiva philosophy as well as Tantra, but that did not necessitate that aesthetics become a religious matter (Pollock 21).

This changed with the Bhakti movement in the fifteenth and sixteenth century, which also marked the last flourish insofar as *rasa* theorization in Sanskrit was concerned (see Voss Roberts 63). In Bengal, Jiva and Rupa Goswami promulgated a five-fold structure of the Bhakti *rasas*, which combined inextricably theological concerns with aesthetic concerns so that the ideal spectator/audience became simultaneously the ideal devotee as well. The great cultural influence of the Bhakti movement on a pan-Indian scale continues to shape not only contemporary popular conceptions of India’s “tradition vs modernity”, but also, as I argue in chapter I, are embedded in residual “structures of feeling” in popular genre fiction with few ostensible connections to the precolonial past.

How rasa works: three principles

Three linked theoretical concepts proposed and/or elaborated upon by Abhinavagupta require an overview here of how rasa works and how it may be used to gain a deeper appreciation of the emotive (but not necessarily psychological) valences in literary texts, whether they stem from the Indian tradition or not. These are:

The *Sahridaya* audience/spectator (and later *pathak*/reader): This is one of the central premises of the rasa experience, and has retained some critical weight over the millennia. From Bharata's evocation of the *sumana*³⁵, one who has a pure/cultivated mind as the ideal spectator, it is obvious that not all spectators are possessed of this pure mind. Abhinavagupta links this older idea to the concept of *sahridaya*, ie. "possessed of the same heart" thus: "The faculty of self-identification with the events represented [the determinants etc.] demands that the mirror of the mind should be made completely clear, by means of repeated acquaintance with and practice of poetry...ready to receive all the images which are reflected" (insert in the original, Gnoli xliii-iv). The reference to the "clear mind-mirror" necessitates that the ideal spectator should possess the mental fortitude to disassociate from his own current concerns or emotions, even as the performance stimulates the latent and stable emotional states/determinants innate in every person (*sthāyi bhāvas*), leading to the rasa experience.

Thus rasa experience does not only exist in the poet's *pratibha* (genius) but is directly experienced by the *sahridaya* spectator through the text, joining all three elements in a continuum (Patnaik 46). Being possessed of *sanskara* (all cognitive or emotional experience) and

³⁵ Bharata says: "(It is called *rasa*) because it can be savored ... as gourmets (*sumanas*) are able to savor the flavor of food prepared with many spices.... so sensitive spectators (*sumanas*) savor the primary emotions suggested by the acting out of the various *bhāvas*." (Masson and Patwardhan 47)

vasana (tendencies of past lives), only a *sahridaya* can fully appreciate the vision of the poet and the text. As such the *sahridaya*, often also called the *samajika*, is simultaneously the ideal critic or *bhavaka* who has successfully contemplated the poet's vision; if he fails to do so, he is no more than a *bhavuka* with no independent judgment (Prasad 143). Of course, context-specific and material considerations of who could become a *sahridaya* remain largely unarticulated in terms of gender, caste and class, defaulting to the upper-caste (and/or) upper-class male in the classical tradition.

In contemporary texts, genre or otherwise, the term *sahridaya*, retained from earlier usage, is usually combined with *pathak* or reader, often in an authorial or narratorial appeal of sympathy towards controversial content. The term *bhavuka*, too, retains some of its old meanings as characterizing unproductive thinkers and daydreamers in current usage. A related term drawn from later Bhakti terminology, *rasika*, or “one who can savor rasa”, also circulates in current usage, with particular reference to persons who are capable of appreciating wit or the comic *rasa* and in iterations like “*rasika nāgara*”, indicating a proclivity towards the erotic or *srngāra* *rasa* with or without Bhakti connotations (Pollock 22).

Sadharanikarana: Various translated as “generalization”, “transpersonalization”, “communization” and “universalization”, this is the process of the *rasa* experience. It is, for the *sahridaya*, “a self-identification with the imagined situation, devoid of any practical interest and...of any relation whatsoever with the limited Self, as [if] it were impersonal” (Gnoli xxii). Without this generalizing principle, a poetic treatment of the love between Shiva and Parvati, for instance, could be embarrassing/offensive on account of witnessing sexual escapades of revered gods, or generate indifference, as it has nothing whatsoever to do with the spectator, or make him

jealous if he himself were sexually or romantically frustrated. None of these *vighnas* or obstacles would lead to the *rasa* experience. Instead the *sahridaya* must recognize the action/description to be subsumed under a “poetic universal”, as applying to characters *like* Shiva and Parvati and providing grounds for communication and commonality on the basis of universal human emotion, here love-in-union (*sambhoga srngāra*) between a married couple. The *sahridaya* not only apprehends this universal human emotion but also reproduces or actualizes the emotion on his own, leading to the *rasa* experience, by transcending (temporarily) his own ego (Pollock 18). Moreover, the contextual or temporal distance from events depicted, along with a lack of any direct impact of such events on our own lives, also aids this generalizing process (Chari 200). Thus *sadharanikarana* can be interpreted as a two-way street—from the particular to the universal and back to the particular, where the first and second particular are not the same (Patankar 294).

Many of these observations hold theoretically true for contemporary genre fiction. Despite the great degree of individualization of character, reader-identification depends greatly on universal human emotions as shared ground for communication. In any case, as Chari argues, “Generic attributes cannot be apprehended unless they are exhibited in individuals” (201). For genre fiction broadly, much of the thrill arises from reader-identification with characters only superficially like us (the common man); their exceptional qualities, along with whatever peculiarities of setting or circumstance, arouse a mixed feeling of simultaneously wanting to be and not be in that particular character’s shoes. This is achieved by an evocative tone of narration; for instance, in a crime novel, dry details of court proceedings are narrated in a way that arouses responses of wonder, suspense, disgust etc., even if it purports to be “objective” and “empirical” (Chari 200). Moreover, the friction between the general and the particular is another of the

pleasures of many types of genre fiction: we know that typically the detective will not suffer death and the crime will be solved, but are thrilled to watch the mystery unfold. Universalization also implies, tangentially, that the readership/audience has a certain level of familiarity with similar texts, the above-mentioned “repeated acquaintance with and practice of poetry”. For instance, the SF megatext can be likened to this common ground as circumscribing a “horizon of expectations”, whereas the specific innovations of particular “novums” exist in a dialectical tension with it.

Camatkara: This concept, argued strongly by Abhinavagupta and resonating with Advaita Śaiva philosophy, is the mode of the rasa experience; all rasas are inherently pleasurable and arouse a feeling of marvelous enjoyment (*adbhutabhoga*). Raghavan observes: “originally the word *camatkara* was an onomatopoeic word referring to the clicking sound we make with our tongue when we taste something snappy, and in the course of its semantic enlargements...came to mean a sudden fillip relating to any feeling of a pleasurable type” (*Some Concepts* 268-9). Since the rasa experience is transpersonalized, this sense of marvelous enjoyment is also less of a subjective matter and more of a transcendent and sublime delight shorn of personal ego (Patnaik 42-43). This is unlike either everyday experience/ “ordinary sense of perception” or the experience of the yogi, implying the “cessation of the...ordinary, historical world...and its sudden replacement by a new dimension of reality” possible only through the artwork (Gnoli xlvi). As such, the rasa experience is also supramundane or *alukika*, and is at a similar but not an identical level to the experience of the Absolute (*Brahman*) in yogic spiritual trance (*nirvikalpa samādhi*) (Patnaik 52).

The matter of *all* rasas functioning in this mode of pleasurable, marvelous enjoyment remains a debated topic; *bībhatsa* or the disgusting rasa in particular has come under fire for proposing that ugly, bloodied, worm-infested, deformed or decomposing bodies could possibly arouse any pleasurable sensation. However, the mere description of unsightly/decomposing bodies is usually not the end-goal of such composition; rather, it emphasizes recognition of a deeper universal truth, the ephemerality of life. In Abhinavagupta’s view, this leads to a transitory state of *nirveda* (detachment/ alienation/ world-weariness) and/or *karuṇa* (compassion/pity) and finally to the controversial ninth rasa, *santa* or a relishing of peace that comes with cessation of all egoistic desires. In his reading of the “Disgust and Ugly” in contemporary texts, Arindam Chakrabarty presents six modes thereof, and emphasizes the “absorption of the [“pure”] hideous for the sake of the sheer thrill of sensing every fold of embodied existence”, a “Romantic sensibility” which is also shared across kalpabigyan (insert mine, 361).

These three linked theoretical concepts also allow for a broader portability of rasa aesthetics beyond the Sanskrit tradition. Contemporary criticism on rasa has also emphasized the relevance and wide applicability of the rasa theory and explored rasa vis-à-vis western poetics/critical theories and literatures, stressing that the rasas and permanent states (*bhāvas*) discussed by Bharata may be applicable to the literary production of all human cultures³⁶. Scholars like Patnaik, Hiriyanna and Chari apply rasa principles to examples from western literature but Pollock in particular appears to be unconvinced by this trend and studies like “Rasa

³⁶ Contemporary rasa scholarship in English as taken mainly three approaches: standalone evaluations/translations (Sheldon Pollock, Masson and Patwardhan, Ranerio Gnoli, Patankar, WS Yalimbe); comparisons with western theories of poetry, psychology, religion etc. (SK Dey, VK Chari, V. Dharwadker, M. Voss-Roberts); and applications of rasa theory to western “highbrow” literature (Priadarshi Patnaik, Arindam Chakrabarty). The application of rasa aesthetics to contemporary “highbrow” Indian literature is rarer; Chakrabarty, Edwin Gerow and Darius Cooper’s studies were the few available.

in Shakespeare”. Irrespective of which side of this debate one chooses, *rasa*, as I demonstrate in the chapters that follow, remains useful for analyses of contemporary Indian genre fiction in general and *kalpabigyan* in particular, perhaps much more than for highbrow, realistic literary fiction³⁷.

The building blocks of *Rasa*

Bharata, in the sixth and seventh chapter of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (*Treatise on Drama*) asserts that *rasa* arises from a combination of *bhāvas*. The eight *rasas*, namely erotic (*srngāra*), comic (*hāsyā*), compassionate/pathetic (*karuṇā*), furious (*raudra*), heroic (*vīra*), terrifying (*bhayānaka*), disgusting (*bībhatsa*), and awesome/wonderful (*adbhuta*) are paired with their respective *sthāyi bhāvas*³⁸, the latent and stable emotional states innate in every person, enduring “in everyday life for an extended period, ranging from days to decades” (Dharwadker 1384). Insofar as the *rasa* experience is concerned, the *sthāyi bhāvas* are accompanied by thirty-three transitory states (*vyabhicāri* or *sancari bhāvas*) and eight involuntary psychosomatic states (*sattvika bhavas*) (For complete translated list see Dharwadker 1398-9). Included in the category of *bhāva* are also *vivbhāvas* and *anubhāvas*, which are descriptive of causes and results/responses, respectively,

³⁷ Some notable similarities between the Sanskrit poetry and drama and contemporary genre fiction may be brought to bear here, the full exposition of which are regrettably beyond the scope of this chapter. First and most striking of these is the use of mythology. Except for a few dramatic categories like *prahasana* or *dima*, most classical Sanskrit literature used mythological sources and retold tales of godly, aristocratic and/or priestly heroes. In contemporary Indian SF in particular, mythology is reconfigured vis-à-vis science for the modern age, and I would point the interested reader to Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay’s “On the Mythologerm” and “Kalpavigyan and Imperial Technoscience” for a more complete view. Secondly, a great deal of both classical Sanskrit literature and genre are formulaic on the levels of plot and character, and function within a more-or-less circumscribed ‘horizon of expectations’, which may be radically different from western conceptions of the same. Gerow and Cooper’s analyses elaborate that view. And finally, the question of realistic verisimilitude, the lack of which impedes *rasa*, is perhaps a retained aesthetic rationale behind why Indian SF and fantasy are still largely set in verisimilar, not alternative universes, though there are more immediate historical reasons for this configuration. Two lesser points need also be mentioned on the question of retention of old aesthetic values: the ‘education through entrainment’ axiom and an eschewal of excessive descriptions of gore and/or sex as found in *Nāṭyaśāstra*, *Abhinavabhāratī*, *Dhyanvaloka* and *Locana*.

³⁸ These pairs are: *rati*: *srngāra* (sexual love, desire: erotic); *hāsa*: *hāsyā* (laughter, merriment: comic); *soka*: *karuṇā* (sorrow, grief: compassionate, pathetic); *krodha*: *raudra* (anger, rage: furious); *utsāha*: *vīra* (enthusiasm, courage: heroic); *bhaya*: *bhayānaka* (fear, terror: terrifying); *jugupsā*: *bībhatsa* (‘disgust, horror, hatred: disgusting); and *vismaya*: *adbhuta* (‘astonishment, wonder’: awesome/wonderful).

with some overlaps between them for particular rasas. However, without a fine-tuning of the *sthāyī bhāvas*’ potential within the processes/modes discussed above, there would be no rasa or aesthetic response.

The erotic (*srngāra*), comic (*hāsya*), heroic (*vīra*) and wonderful (*adbhuta*) are concordant rasas, while the remaining four—the compassionate/pathetic (*karuṇa*), the furious (*raudra*), the terrifying (*bhayānaka*), and the disgusting (*bībhatsa*)—are discordant rasas (Chari 68). Further, a text can have a combination of rasas, but that does not produce a new compound or a “cocktail of emotions”; the stronger element (*angi* rasa) always asserts itself and the text in totality has a single dominant rasa (Chari 68, Prasad 262). Rasas are also friendly or inimical to each other; for instance, with rare exceptions in Sanskrit poetry, *srngāra* and *karuṇa* are inimical, while *srngāra* and *hāsya* are paired, friendly rasas. When combined without respect to propriety, the discordant rasas usually overpower the concordant. In the later Sanskrit tradition, we find lists of “proper” rasa recipes as poetry became increasingly formulaic and form was privileged over content (Prasad 255-7, Dutta 2:1109).

In the chapters that follow, I demonstrate how kalpabigyan in general utilizes the positive associations of *adbhuta* rasa (wonderful/ awesome) as the dominant/ enduring rasa in combination primarily with *vīra*, *hāsya*, *bhayānaka*, and sometimes *bībhatsa*.

Within the Sanskrit tradition, *adbhuta* was largely neglected as a primary rasa, perhaps because an overuse of the element of surprise was likely to alienate the audience and make the composition overtly unrealistic/non-verisimilar, which Abhinavagupta warned stridently against as a major *dosa* or impediment to the relishing of rasa (Gnoli 63). From Visvanatha’s fourteenth century *Sāhityadarpana*, we find mention of his grandfather Narayana’s work on *adbhuta* rasa synthesis; ie. that the end-result of all rasas is *adbhuta*. Unfortunately, that work is now lost and

Visvanatha has only three lines about it (Subramanian 3; *The number of rasa-s* 205). Beyond Bharata's first formulations and a short note by Abhinavagupta, the few elaborations on the topic in the classical tradition are (unfortunately) limited to its *camatkara* aspect (Subramanian 4-5).

Bharata lists the *vibhāvas* or causes of *adbhuta* rasa as “seeing heavenly beings, gaining one's desired object, going to a temple, a garden or a meeting place, or (seeing) a flying chariot, a magic show (*māya*) or a juggler's show (*indrajāl*)” (Masson and Patwardhan 56). This description does not distinguish between divine prowess, magic, or science, but from a contemporary standpoint can be interpreted as encompassing both material (in SF or detective fiction) and supernatural (fantasy, weird/horror) causes— for instance, “going to a temple, a garden or a meeting place” is easily spotted in romance/erotic fiction with its predominant rasa as *srngāra* ; “gaining one's desired object” in the solving of whodunit's or treasure-hunts; or “heavenly beings” in aliens and “flying chariots” in spaceships.

Adbhuta was usually found in a subordinate relationship to *vīra* or the heroic rasa in the Sanskrit tradition, where “[t]he result of the heroic (rasa) is known as the awesome” (Masson and Patwardhan 48). This particular relationship between *vira* and *adbhuta* is readily discerned today in serialized SF with scientist-heroes, who arouse wonder through their inventions and discoveries. The two paired rasas *bhayānaka* and *bībhatsa* were similarly under-explored in traditional compositions but have arguably become the most explored rasas in modern literature, especially in SF thrillers and horror/weird fiction (Patnaik 175). *Srngāra* and *hāsya* are also paired, but as kalpabigyan continues to be published predominantly for younger audiences, and as Bengali readership remains squeamish about romance and sexuality in *kishor sahitya*, we see here other attributes of the comic, such as reversal of faith and situational comedy. As I have

discussed these three rasas extensively in the following chapters, I now enumerate the five-fold Bhakti rasas.

Rupa Goswami's 16th century Sanskrit treatise *Śrī Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu* (*The Ocean of the Nectar of Devotion*) and its "sequel" *Sri Ujjvala-Nilamani* (*The Bright Sapphire [of Divine Love]*) are considered core texts of Vaishnavism, the stream of Hinduism that considers Krishna as the supreme Godhead. Here, Rupa Goswami promulgates the five-fold structure of Bhakti rasas, a formulation that continues to circulate in Vaishnava-predominant Bengali culture, much like stories from *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* (even after colonialism and Marxist rule). Both texts focus on the fifth and final Bhakti rasa, ie. *madhura* (erotic love between Krishna, his beloved [aunt] Radha and numerous *gopis* [cowherd-girls]), but *Śrī Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu* delineates the general characteristics of the previous four rasas, which appear in a linear progression of increasing devotion towards the godhead Krishna. Beginning with *śānta* reformulated in devotional terms from Abhinavagupta's concept of the same name, the devotee proceeds next to *dāsya* or servitude; then to *sakhya* or friendship, then to *vātsalya* or paternal affection, finally reaching *madhura* or erotic love. Different characters in the Krishna stories can simultaneously embody the three middle states, but not the final one³⁹.

Unlike Bharata's rasas, these use many more transcendental descriptors and stories from the Puranas as illustrations, for instance, the paradigmatic and striking image of *vātsalya* rasa in Krishna's adoptive mother Yashoda's breasts overflowing with milk in paternal devotion-emotion at the sight of her divine son (Voss Roberts 63). So a purely secular interpretation of

³⁹ Interestingly, *Radha-bhāva*, or the state-of-being-the-beloved-Radha, is not gender-bound in the belief system of the devotees. The devotee, whether male or female by sex, always occupied the role of the female vis-à-vis Krishna, considered male, though His masculinity is also not static. The aspect of fragile masculinity is embodied in pervasive stereotypes and theory, though successive Vaishnava goswamis were infamous for their rapaciousness. This was a reason why Vaishnava-predominant Bengal was seen as "effeminate" by the British colonizer and Indians from other regions. But it also indicates a different way of constructing postcolonial notions of masculinity and femininity in Bengal. See also Voss Roberts 64.

these rasas to “fit” with SF is perhaps not possible at all. But I argue that Mitra and Ray surreptitiously appropriate *sakhya* and *vātsalya* rasas, these related to two most universally pervasive emotions from the set which are also appropriate for *kishor sahitya*, and deploy them in contemporary settings predicated on technoscientific modernity: the middle-class urban boarding-house (chapter I) and the lonely household of a celibate scientist (chapter II). My analysis therefore foregrounds and highlights those narrative constructions that appeal to the postcolonial Bengali (if not broadly Indian) reader. These structures of feeling may be characterized as the being “moved by a certain kind of narrative construction” or finding a “particular heightened mode of drama” to be “sublime”: these “longings” have been silenced and fractured by colonialism but remain embedded in Indian cultural practice (Chandra 86).

CHAPTER OUTLINE

In the following chapters, I have divided the literature into two sections: “Adventures with Science: SF Series” and “Utopias and Dystopias”. Section I includes three chapters: Chapter I on Premendra Mitra’s Ghana-da series, Chapter II on Satyajit Ray’s Professor Shonku series and Chapter III on Adrish Bardhan’s Professor Nat Boltu Chakra series. For broader cross-cultural perspectives, I have included comparative readings with select British and American texts like Lord Dunsany’s Joseph Jorkens, the BBC series Dr. Who and magazine-era American SF as appropriate. Section II contains Chapter IV on Premendra Mitra’s dystopic novel *Manu Dwadosh (The Twelfth Manu)* and Chapter V on four utopic novellas from the *adbhuture* (ghostly-weird) series by Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay; I have not explicitly compared them to SF from other parts of the world, though such comparisons may certainly be drawn.

Mitra, Ray and Mukhopadhyay remain three of the more renowned names in postcolonial Bangla mainstream realist literature, while also having contributed extensively to cinema and *kishor sahitya*. Bardhan, however, mostly dedicated himself to genre fiction through translations, editing anthologies and writing both SF and popular science books for young readers. With the exception of Ray, whose cinema is internationally well-known today, the other authors remain virtually unknown beyond their linguistic sphere. I have therefore included short author biographies prefacing each chapter for a condensed overview of their contribution to mainstream literature and *kishor sahitya* alike.

Adventures with Science: The SF Series

CHAPTER I

PREMENDRA MITRA'S GHANA-DA SERIES (1945-88)¹

Premendra Mitra and his contribution to Bangla literature

Premendra Mitra (1904-1988) — poet, novelist, essayist, short-story writer and filmmaker—was one of the most prolific and critically acclaimed writers of modern Bengal. Coming into literary prominence in the 1920's, he continued to write both mainstream fiction and non-fiction and *kishor sahitya* throughout the 70's and 80's. His early novel *Pank (Mire*, serialized 1925-26) , with its moving portrayal of urban poverty, was criticized for its boldness, but he continued to contend with relevant social issues and problems of middle-class urban life in Bengal in his short stories, anthologized in collections like *Panchashar (The Five Arrows*, 1929), *Benami Bondor (The Nameless Port*, 1930) and *Mrittka (Soil*, 1932). An important voice in Bangla poetry at a time of considerable experimentation in response to the poetic tradition espoused by Rabindranath Tagore, Mitra wrote without cant or hypocrisy on the sufferings of the poor as well as some of the most delicate poems on love and nature, in collections like *Prothoma (The First Lady*, 1932) (for additional details, see Amlan Dutta, "Introduction").

¹ A version of this chapter was published as "Ghana-da's Tall-Telling: Reframing History, Estranging Science, and Appropriating Indigenous Structures of Feeling", *Studies in the Fantastic*, no. 4, winter 2016/Spring 2017, pp. 48-81.

All quotations from Ghana-da stories from *Collected Ghana-da* in 3 volumes, so I have not mentioned "Mitra" in parenthetical citations for the primary texts.

Apart from these mainstream works in poetry and prose, Mitra contributed significantly to genre fiction, especially science fiction, detective fiction and the ghost story, creating some of the most enduring and lovable characters in Bangla literature: Ghanashyam Das or Ghana-da² (a teller of tall tales), Parashar Barma (a detective aspiring to be a poet), Mamababu's (maternal uncle's) fantastic travel tales and "ghost-hunter" Mejkorta; of these, Ghana-da is the longest running series (1945-88). Mitra also wrote over fifteen standalone (novella-length) kalpabigyan novels such as *Pñipre Puran (The Story of the Ants, 1931)*, *Manu Dwadosh (The Twelfth Manu, 1964)*, *Moydanober Dweep (The Island of Moy-danob, 1974)* and *Surjo Jekhane Neel (Where the Sun is Blue, 1988)*. Given the variety and corpus of his SF writing, it would therefore not be incorrect to consider Mitra a pioneer in kalpabigyan.

The Ghana-da stories (1945-88)

Published mostly in the *pujabarshiki*³ annuals from Dev Sahitya Kutir and Sarat Sahitya Bhavan (1945-1969) and in *Anandamela* (Ananda Publishers, 1973-1980) and *Kishor Gyan Bigyan* (Rabindra Bharati 1980-88), Premendra Mitra's Ghana-da stories appeared every year between 1945 and 1988, except in 1946 (2: 643-4). The complete repertoire—including Ghana-da's own adventures, the *Mahabharata* stories and the adventures of his predecessors— are

² Ghanashyam Das, shortened to Ghana. The suffix 'da' (short for 'dada', elder brother) appended to a name indicates a kind of universal elder-brotherhood in Bengali culture, and Bangla young-adult literature is peppered with many such 'da's, for example, Gourkishor Ghosh's Braja-da (collected 1967), Narayan Gangopadhyay's Teni-da (1946-70?) and Satyajit Ray's Felu-da (1965-96). In them can be seen some facets of Ghana-da: Braja-da's *gulpos* (facetious tall-tales) create the same kind of imaginary interpolations in history and exaggerate Bengali and national pride against colonial 'sahib's to an extent that it becomes a caricature or satire; Felu-da deals squarely with the aspect of mystery-solving and travel to faraway lands; and Teni-da has a proclivity to make up the most outrageous explanations for simple everyday mistakes.

³ The annual festival of Durga Puja, celebrated by Bengalis all over the world, is also a set time for Bengali publishers to bring out both standalone books and large annual compendiums. These *pujabarshiki* volumes, annuals on the occasion of the Pujas, contain stories, novellas, poems, scholarly and semi-scholarly essays and articles on contemporary events, sports or fashion trends, depending on the particular publication's focus.

narrated to two different audiences in completely different settings. These consist of (one incomplete and) sixty-two complete short stories, six novella-length novels and one full-length novel. The short stories are narrated by Ghana-da to his housemates Shibu, Shishir, Sudhir and Gaur at 72 Banamali Naskar Lane Lane, Kolkata—an address as legendary to the Bengali reader as Sherlock Holmes’ 221B Baker Street is to the reader in English. The majority⁴ of these stories feature Ghana-da as the hero and are premised on the scientific (or the science fictional), where Ghana-da, acting as a quintessential Bengali hero, solves various global crises with an intelligent application of little-known and vastly exaggerated scientific principles. The second set of novels, where Ghana-da fills in supposed gaps in pre-colonial Indian and world history (such as *Robinson Crusoe was a Woman* and *Ghana-da becomes a “Das”/servant*) are narrated to a different, older audience at a lakeside setting. Ghana-da is not the hero in these novels, and I have not considered them as these do not contain any significant SF elements. In addition, there are one play and four proverb-like poems called *Ghanar Bochon*, literally, “Ghana’s Prophetic Utterances”, in the mould of the proverbial *Khonar Bochon*⁵, a series of medieval cryptic poems in rhymed meter.

In this chapter, my arguments are based primarily on examples from the set of short stories, where Ghana-da is the teller *and* hero of the kalpabigyan tall-tales he narrates. I have selected these short stories as they engage directly with how scientificity is constructed and its intersections with history as we know it.

⁴ In a small handful of short stories narrated to his housemates, Ghana-da corrects supposed mistakes within the narrative of the epic *Mahabharata*, and is not the hero of these tall-tales.

⁵ *Khonar Bochon* is ascribed to the 14th century legendary woman astrologer and mathematician Khona (or Leelaboti). Khona is often considered the first female Bengali poet. She was married to Mihir, another famed medieval astrologer. The *bochons* are prophetic forecasts related to daily lives in rural medieval Bengal, such as weather, farming conditions and health. These are shorn of references to god, religion and misogynistic ideas. See P. Basu, *Kinbodontir Khona*.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has four sections. In the first section, **“Narrative Structure and History: A Peculiar Postcolonial Anxiety”**, I explore how the employment of narrative structures like the tall-tale or the diary in kalpabigyan narratives reveal a deep-seated anxiety of the postcolonial Bengali middle-class regarding their colonial history, or rather, the inability to have written their own version history during the 200 years of colonial rule. Events described in a tall-tale or diary necessarily occur in the past; by inserting lacunae into the official version of history, the tall-tale and the diary open the past itself up to investigation and insert the fictional postcolonial hero (upholding their national or regional identity, as it may be), as an unrecognized but active agent in the processes of history-making.

I then posit the narrative structure of the Ghana-da short stories as a nested narrative: the “tall-tale” section, narrated by Ghana-da to his four housemates, is nested in the “frame storyworld,” narrated by Sudhir in the first person directly to the reader. In the second section of this chapter, **“The Tall-Tale”** I discuss the tall-tale portion of the story. Here, I present a reading of games of truth in tall-tales; based as they are on real-world historical details, it becomes difficult to determine where the truth ends and the lies begin. Directly challenging colonial-era stereotypes of both the hyper-masculine adventure hero and the “passive” or “listless” “native”, I argue that Ghana-da’s exploits carve out a space of historical agency from a deeply humanist, postcolonial perspective, especially in comparison with Lord Dunsany’s Joseph Jorkens series. I further argue that Ghana-da co-opts the scientific enterprise (MacLeod’s concept of “imperial science”) and rigorously applies scientific tenets, challenging the stereotype of the superstitious and unscientific native not only by beating scientific-minded “westerners” at their own game, but also by engaging directly with the belief systems of the “uncivilized” others he encounters. In

contesting the discourses, binaries and hierarchies produced and propagated by colonialism, be it on the axes of race, gender or mastery over knowledge or science, I argue that Mitra's Ghana-da well exemplifies the "Empire writes back" axiom. Even though the primary intended reader here is *not* the Anglophone reader, Ghana-da explores the limits of possibility within colonial⁶ space-time, while simultaneously foregrounding his Bengali identity.

Next, the third section, entitled "**The Frame Storyworld**", examines the portion of the narratives outside the tall-tale, which is narrated by the first-person narrator Sudhir. I have adapted the term "storyworld" here from Malmgren's discussion on the "story" and the "world" in fiction, which he argues correspond to the syntax and lexicon of language (*Worlds Apart* 6). In juxtaposing the two terms, I wish to draw attention to both the particular plot iteration and the underlying assumptions and structures on which these iterations function. Within this frame storyworld, the practice of *adda* or informal get-togethers, liberally supplied with an endless array of delicious food, provides a conceptual space for the performance of the tall-tales. I argue that the frame storyworld is a verisimilar, ironic and self-reflexive representation of Bengali culture and manners in the decades after Independence, and as such, presents an often-humorous vignette of the near past to contemporary 21st-century readers in Bengal and India.

In the fourth and final section, titled "**Appropriating Traditional Structures of Feeling**", I bring together the previous analyses with narrative structures from the ethos of Bengal Vaishnavism⁷. I argue that the Ghana-da series appropriates and reworks these very traditional-religious structures of feeling for scientific-minded postcolonial audiences. By

⁶ The tall-tale portion of the stories is set in past, in the colonial period between the two World Wars.

⁷ A stream of the pan-Indian medieval Bhakti movement, Vaishnavism attempted to reform ritual-bound, Brahmin-priest-dominated Hinduism by undermining the hierarchies inherent in the caste system. The Vaishnavas relied on music, dance and oral narratives to popularize their beliefs, while also adapting and modifying the centuries-long tradition of aesthetic-emotive (*rasa*) theory (Dimock et al. x-xix).

drawing upon their form but transforming the content from religious-devotional ecstasy to a search for scientific knowledge, I argue that the series captures that elusive spirit of narrative expectation which has long informed Bengali and Indian oral and literary practice, and barring which the sustained popularity of Ghana-da's tall-tales are difficult to situate.

“Structures of feeling” is here understood first in its most literal sense—“structures” as in cyclical or linear frameworks and “feeling” as in emotion, such as friendship or erotic love. Raymond Williams’ concept of “social experiences in solution, as distinct from other social semantic formations which have been precipitated and are more evidently and more immediately available” underlies this argument (133-34). The dominant literary convention this series most closely approximates is the scientific adventure, even though this subset itself is marginalized in mainstream Bangla literature. But a structural reliance on pre-colonial (and hence pre-“west”ern-scientific) narrative modes remains in a residual form in the series.

Narrative Structure and History: A Peculiar Postcolonial Anxiety

Of the three major long-running series in postcolonial Bangla SF, two employ narrative modes that directly engage with the processes of history-making: the Ghana-da tall-tales and Satyajit Ray’s Professor Shonku’s diaries. The narrative device of the tall-tale and the diary, especially where the teller is also the hero of the tale, necessitates the occurrence of the tale in the past. They have much in common with the SF subgenre of alternate history, where the narrative itself begins from a previous historical period or protagonists time-travel to a past time (“Alternate History”). However, the Ghana-da and Shonku stories *do not* engender true “jonbar points” or distinctly different historical trajectories leading up to the present time of narration

and cannot therefore be considered as typical examples of alternate history SF (“Jonbar Point”). Ghana-da and Shonku stories also have much in common with “secret” or “hidden” histories, SF narratives set in the past-which-could-have-happened but were supposedly never recognized or willfully ignored in historical annals, even though, unlike typical “secret history” narratives, the Ghana-da and Shonku series do not subscribe to conspiracy theories (“Introduction: What is Alternate History.”). Instead, these narrative devices create a lacuna in the conventionally accepted understanding of colonial history itself. By deliberately inserting the tale in a history which, as written in the frame storyworld (which is verisimilar to the “real” world), finds no mention of any such occurrence, it prompts a reevaluation of history itself from a postcolonial perspective.

The usage of these historically-oriented narrative devices in kalpabigyan also reveals a deep-seated postcolonial anxiety as to the “lack of history” of the formerly colonized. In the particular case of the British colonization of India, this “lack of history” had been successfully used by the colonizer to justify Empire and was part and parcel of the “white man’s burden”, along with the introduction of a scientific mindset in the “superstitious natives”. Colonialism and Science went hand-in-hand. Thomas Babington Macaulay’s infamous “Minute on Indian Education” (1835) repeatedly refers to history-writing in Sanskrit (the “best” from the Indian tradition) as fanciful, not factual excursions, worth less even than British schoolbooks, and exalts the “superiority of the Europeans”⁸. Similarly, James Mill’s *The History of British India* (1820),

⁸ Macaulay writes:

But when we pass from works of imagination to works in which facts are recorded and general principles investigated, the superiority of the Europeans becomes absolutely immeasurable. It is, I believe, no exaggeration to say that all the historical information which has been collected from all the books written in the Sanscrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgments used at preparatory schools in England. (see Laurie, 174)

argues for the “natives”’ profound inferiority on the basis of not having what he considers reliable historical records⁹.

During the “Bengal Renaissance”, 19th century Bengali intellectual elites and middle-class, created by a sea-change in educational policies (shift from Sanskrit and Persian to English) and the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793 (consolidation of the *zamindari* system which ensured a class of landlords easy access to funds at the expense of common farmers), paradoxically responded to this onslaught of colonial history through various subversive methods of reframing history itself. While most of these attempts remained in the fictional mode, like the historical novels of Bankimchanda Chattopadhyay, particularly *Anandamath* (1882), they also served to provide a space for historical agency to the colonized subject.

In this context, then, Ghana-da’s engagement with history in the fictional mode can be read as a postcolonial response to the continuation of ingrained colonial ideologies. Moreover, as most of the tall-tales are set in the colonial period and as Mitra is known to have been meticulous with factual detail, these representations are also verisimilar to power and knowledge structures that operated in the “real” world.

⁹ James Mill writes:

This people, indeed, are perfectly destitute of historical records. Their ancient literature affords not a single production to which the historical character belongs. The works in which the miraculous transactions of former times are described, are poems. Most of them are books of a religious character, in which the exploits of the gods, and their commands to mortals, are repeated or revealed. In all, the actions of men and those of deities are mixed together, in a set of legends, more absurd and extravagant, more transcending the bounds of nature and of reason, less grateful to the imagination and taste of a cultivated and rational people, than those which the fabulous history of any other nation presents to us. The Brahmens are the most audacious, and perhaps the most unskilful fabricators, with whom the annals of fable have yet made us acquainted. (Mill 1: 144)

The Tall-Tale¹⁰

The narrative structure of the Ghana-da stories remains fairly consistent throughout. The basic plot parameters, in order of appearance, are:

- a) the frame storyworld and character of the storyteller, which defines the tale as a tall-tale,
- b) the point of surprise, which is usually a statement of the SF novum in the form of a nearly-incomprehensible and outrageous claim,
- c) the tall-tale where Ghana-da manages to avert disaster yet again, replete with “real” world geographical and historical details of the travelled land and
- d) an explication of the novum leading to a plausible resolution.

A fundamental premise of the tall-tale is that the tale is always described by the teller as true, and always received by narratees/the immediate audience of the teller as false. Tall-tales play a “game of truth” with the reader, as the events within the tale may be explained with extrapolative logical moves; they become *false* only when compared to a framework of non-fiction outside the tale in the frame storyworld, which in the case of Ghana-da is verisimilar to the world of the author and reader. As Chattopadhyay argues:

All fiction is by definition false, the important part of the tall tale is not that which is clearly false, but that which posits itself as true...By paying attention only to the locus of improbability, one is likely to miss out on the power effects of the images and ideas taken as true within the fiction. (“Aliens”)

Three layers of “truth” are particularly important for the tall-tale—**the character of the storyteller** who is also the hero of the tall-tale, **the presentation of the “other”** and **the use of science**. While an isolated reading of Ghana-da’s tall-tales reveals much, it is in comparison with near-contemporary Lord Dunsany’s Joseph Jorkens’ travel tall-tales that their uniqueness and

¹⁰ In this section, I have borrowed from and expanded on the framework Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay presents in “Aliens of the Same World”.

importance as a mode of social and scientific critique can be charted on the axis of the reversal of imperialist and orientalist stereotypes.

Truth/Falsity: Character of the Storyteller

Firstly, the character of Ghana-da in the frame storyworld is so incongruous with his character within the tall-tales that even his narratees/ immediate audience do not hesitate to be openly sarcastic about it. As the yet-unnamed narrator (Sudhir as revealed later) in the very first Ghana-da story “*Mosha*” (“Mosquito”, 1945) comments—“We have had to concede that in the *last two hundred years*, there is no place on earth that he hasn’t visited, no world event with which he was not linked” (emphasis mine, 1: 21). It is hardly coincidental that Ghana-da’s temporal ambit is limited specifically to the 200 years of colonial rule, where there is nothing that he cannot accomplish and no obstacle that can stop him. He is an agent of “*dushter domon, shishter palon*”, a common Bangla phrase associated with Krishna, the paradigmatic hero who subdues the corrupt and upholds the good of humankind. Equally proficient in the use of wit and cunning as he is in the martial arts, he travels the world averting disaster and suppressing greed wherever it rears its ugly head. Within the tall tale, he is an idealized hero who encapsulates the (impossible) desires and dreams of the Bengali middle-class male.

Within the frame storyworld, however, his character is diametrically opposed—he is an epicure, an “armchair adventurer”, a vast storehouse of assorted general knowledge, chronically afraid of every little thing, especially insects and the dark and a creature of habit. In fact, Ghana-da’s only expressions of heroism in the frame storyworld are in the stunning ease with which he consumes mountains of delicious food and the ability to spin a tale from the most insignificant objects or comments. While I discuss this in more detail in the “Frame Storyworld” section, it

would suffice here to say that the only point of commonality between these two versions of Ghana-da is his Bengaliness. Not once does he refer to himself as Indian, always preferring to uphold his regional status as a Bengali, and (with a mere three exceptions) neither do any of his tall-tales explore the geographical and cultural diversity present within the Indian subcontinent. This stark incongruity in character presents the first layer of truth/falsity in the Ghana-da tall-tales.

One significant detail, however, confounds this neat dichotomy: in the frame storyworld, Ghana-da does not possess any books nor is ever observed to consult any reading material other than the daily newspaper (the stories were written before television and computers were widely accessible in Bengali middle-class homes). Since his past is shrouded in mystery, he rarely leaves the boarding-house, and it is impossible to determine his age from his physical appearance, it is unclear how exactly Ghana-da has accumulated such a vast store of historical and scientific knowledge. Given the timeline where the earliest tall-tale is set in 1919 and most of them are clustered in the late colonial period around the two World Wars, this leaves open the slim possibility of the tall-tales being based on his true experiences and adds another layer of complexity to the truth/falsity of character question.

In contrast, Joseph Jorkens, despite being a known teller of tall-tales within the circle of his gentleman's club, is considered a man who has travelled widely and has extensive practical knowledge of "other" cultures and peoples. Like Ghana-da, he needs to be bribed (with good scotch) and is melancholy and boisterous in turn. In many ways, Jorkens is stereotypical of the British gentleman in the late colonial period—upstanding, rational and unflinchingly masculine and these character traits carry over into the tall-tale. There is no incongruity of character and

very little to no self-reflexivity that invites reexamination of deep-seated imperialist ideologies. So, for the Jorkens stories, the truth/falsity of the tall-tale largely lies elsewhere.

Truth/Falsity: Representation of the “other”

SF is arguably a genre *par excellence* in examining the relationship between the “self” and the “other”; usually, these “others” are entities that have not been encountered in the “real” world as of yet, like aliens, mutants, AI’s, alternate worlds etc. (Malmgren 53-58). Until recently, most of the huge corpus of SF had been produced by the colonizing cultures of Europe and (in the context of neocolonialism), European descendents in the USA. For the most part these adhered to the ideologies of Empire in its various guises. Since H. G. Wells’ *The War of the Worlds*, historical encounters of the “west” with others have provided templates for the imaginary others of SF (Kerslake 10-11). However, SF texts that engage with “real” world others in any critically remarkable way are somewhat less common. In this context, both Ghana-da and Jorkens are exceptional in their representation of “other” landscapes, cultures and peoples that are verifiably present in the “real” world; however, their representation of these “others” vary significantly. Where Jorkens’ imaginary upholds an image of the uncivilized exotic, Ghana-da’s representation is far more multifaceted. A comparison of Jorken’s first tall-tale, “The Tale of Abu Laheeb” (1925) and a few of Ghana-da’s tall-tales will serve to illustrate my argument.

In terms of “landscape as ‘other’” let us briefly look at two excerpts. The first is from “The Tale of Abu Laheeb”, where Jorkens travels to Sudan, fifteen years prior to the telling of the story (roughly 1910) in search of the elusive fire-using creature *abu laheeb*:

There are things in Africa that you couldn't believe, and the Bahr el Zeraf is one of them...for days we went up the Zeraf, past the white fish-eagles, haughty and silent and watchful on queer trees, with birds sailing over us that I daren't describe to you for fear you should think I exaggerate the brilliancy of their colors. And so we came to those

marshes where anything might hide, and be utterly hidden by those miles of rushes, and be well enough protected from explorers by a region of monotony more dismal than any other desolate land I've seen. (*In the Land of Time* 268)

The second excerpt is from Ghana-da's "*Maachh*" ("Fish", 1949), where he travels to the Congo in 1929 in search of a European scientist Dr. Hill:

These jungles are so impenetrable that one cannot move a single step without first cutting a path with axes and hatchets. Trees, a hundred to a hundred and fifty feet tall, provide such dense foliage that even during the day only glimmers of sunshine trickle through. Even the forest of weeds under these towering trees is fifteen feet high...We camped at a place where the forest gave way to the savanna or the grasslands...Even a six-foot tall well-built person would be effortlessly submerged. (1: 65)

Both excerpts represent unfamiliar landscapes to their contemporary reader and evoke a "sense of wonder" common to travel tales, but the tone/quality of description is markedly different. Jorkens exoticizes and romanticizes the landscape, reverting to the "man versus nature" dichotomy so prevalent in the cultural imagination of his times, while using qualifiers that reinforce the orientalist image of Africa as a place which is simultaneously alluring and fearsome in a very *Heart of Darkness*-esque manner. The landscape ceases to be merely a setting for the events related to the novum, but acquires valences of its own that, in conjunction with Jorkens "scientific" enterprise as a "white man", (*almost*) validates these imaginative descriptions as facts/truth. In contrast, Ghana-da's description of a comparable landscape only two decades later is peppered with measurements and is far more scientifically factual/ accurate. Instead of exoticising an unfamiliar landscape, his representation creates a believable background for the events related to the novum, while retaining a sense of wonder and incredulity towards nature and the phenomenal world itself. In Ghana-da's universe, "nature" is neither mysterious nor menacing, but part of lived experience: humankind should understand the laws of the natural world using the tenets of science, and strive to conserve ecological balances that have been upset by uncontrolled human avarice.

In terms of “foreigner as other”, too, “Abu Laheeb” and the other Jorkens stories continue in a similar exotic vein, heaping stereotype upon stereotype on the various cultures he encounters in Africa and Asia, reasserting the vision of the “east” as listless, superstitious, degenerate and uncivilized. For instance, Jorkens asserts “the Dinkas are gray, you know”; the Islamic name “Abu Laheeb”, literally, “father of the flame” in Arabic, is also significant in asserting otherness on the axis of religion, given the long history of animosity between Christianity and Islam. His enthusiasm in romantically pursuing a veiled nun remarkably diminishes when she admits to being a “Hottentot”, and so on. Overall, there is little intricacy in the representation of the “other” (for additional examples, see *Mr. Jorkens remembers Africa*).

In contrast, Ghana-da’s representation of “other” cultures and peoples is far more complex. In the course of his adventures as trader-adventurer-spy, Ghana-da encounters three broad types of foreigners: villains, friendly whites, and indigenous peoples. In these encounters, Ghana-da plays various roles appropriate to his projected identity as an educated, well-travelled, colored person in a colonial world.

The first and most important type of other, the villains, are usually elite European or American industrialists and mad-scientists. The hero/villain dichotomy is especially relevant here because the moral universe within which Ghana-da operates has few shades of gray. Motivations and actions are presented from a humanistic perspective that (for the most part) demands equal treatment for all peoples irrespective of race and is geared towards conservation of ecologies and natural resources. The villains, non-recurring and drawn in broad strokes, embody all the negative qualities within the overarching moral framework of the series (and this holds true for all four series considered in this dissertation). Ghana-da’s cunning is usually sufficient to extract covert information from the villains, but their anger can only be subdued by

Ghana-da's favorite martial arts moves, *Banglar Kanchi* and *Dhobi Paat* from *kushti* (Indian wrestling), Kung-Fu, or Jujitsu. By repeatedly depicting the action as "one moment he was charging at me, the next moment he was on the ground," these improbable sequences are more comic than heroic, especially as Ghana-da retains his scrawny, dehydrated-driftwood-like physique in the tall-tales, contrasting visually with the gigantic villains and their underlings. The villains also lack significant malevolent substance as they are always already defeated by the very dint of Ghana-da being present in the space of the boarding-house unharmed.

These villains are also unabashedly greedy and racist, and Ghana-da has to bear with insults like "*kalo nengti*" (black vermin), "nigger," "*kalo morkot*" (black dimwit), or "*kalo bhut*" (uneducated black) owing to his identity as a "native." An especially memorable encounter occurs in "*Jol*" ("Water", 1964), where in exposing an international Karakul lamb (famed for its exquisite wool) smuggling ring, Ghana-da is initially humiliated by the malicious white settler Mr. Fink in South Africa. After crossing the Kalahari Desert without drinking any water, Ghana-da returns to Mr. Fink with a supposedly stolen Karakul lamb and claims his reward:

Fink: "What *bakshish* [reward] d'you want?"

"Nothing much, Bwana" I replied. "One slap, on behalf of all the black people who are less than animals to you, and another, on mine." (1: 344)

This solidarity between different peoples of color is distinctly Gandhian in tone and resonates with Gandhi's experiences with racism in South Africa and his pivotal role in Indian independence. Again, in "*Kaanch*" ("Glass"), Ghana-da encounters and outwits a group of racist Nazis, successfully foiling Nazi plans of building an atom bomb before the Allied forces. These are merely two instances where the series directly engages with the history of racism, particularly in Europe and Africa, and re-imagines them from a postcolonial perspective.

Often, these encounters also result in Ghana-da transforming world history, as when in “*Kaanch*” (“Glass”, 1950) he prevents the Nazis from dropping an atom bomb on London with a mere piece of broken glass (1: 51-61). In curbing the heinous motives and activities of these villains with both wit and physical prowess and saving his allies, international organizations, or the world itself in the process, Ghana-da repeatedly shatters a passive image of the “east” and establishes his agency as a historical subject, an agency that had been largely denied to the colonial native. In addition to the basic character incongruities discussed earlier, this aspect adds another layer to the truth/falsity question, prompting the reader to speculate on the very possibility of a colonized person being able to perform such feats in a colonial world.

The second type of foreigner that Ghana-da encounters is the figure of the benign and friendly European, usually a scientist and greatly indebted to Ghana-da for saving their life in the past or extracting them from tricky situations that call for more than the skill-set available to them. These representations are largely stereotypical of the nineteenth-century self-absorbed figure of the scientist working alone in his own private laboratory, with limited social skills and utterly unfit to deal with other cultures when they have to go into hiding to protect some groundbreaking research from the avaricious villains. Ghana-da, with his vast knowledge of the history, customs and languages of the world, acts as their guide and savior while simultaneously protecting state secrets and upholding a moral universe where everyone gets their just deserts.

The third type of foreigner Ghana-da encounters is the ethnic peoples in Africa, South America and parts of Asia. While these representations are not entirely free of the same biases that we find in much of the adventure fiction produced in nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe, this may be partly attributed to Mitra’s sources of information being books and magazines published from UK and USA. Descriptors like “*ashobhyo*” (uncivilized”) and

“*jonglee*” (primitive/barbaric forest dwellers) occasionally crop up in the earlier tales, but Mitra adopts a more “politically correct” tone in the later stories. According to Ghana-da, the greatest weakness of these ethnic peoples is their reliance on superstition and their priests, “shamans” and “witchdoctors”. These religious rulers are usually motivated in retaining traditional power and authority under the onslaught of foreign influences, of which Ghana-da is also a part, which often pegs them in antagonistic roles. In his travels to Africa and the Arctic, Ghana-da also acquires several “*anuchar*”s or followers like Jugen, Noela and Nanuk, who act as guides. In these relationships, Ghana-da is hardly a “master” figure and trusts them completely, undermining the stereotype of the “treacherous native informant” popularized by orientalists.

Finally, Ghana-da encounters extraterrestrial aliens in a couple of stories and these are interesting not so much in how “alien” the aliens are, but what they reveal about existing power hierarchies and the moral universe that this series repeatedly upholds. For instance, in *Mongolgrohe Ghana-da (Ghana-da in Mars, 1973)* the only novel in which Ghana-da is the hero, ironically reframes colonialism itself. The story presents the possibility of life on Mars, and an interesting what-if: what if there are only ten surviving Martians, each a wondrous beauty, the last survivors of a great and ancient civilization? And what if the Martians were our ancestors? Ghana-da’s male companions (the actor Suranjan Sarkar and his “butler” Batukeshwar) are enticed by these beautiful ladies, and he is so moved by their plight that he leaves them behind and promises to bring back more men from Earth to continue their race. Of course, Ludvic the mad-scientist destroys their spaceship and it becomes impossible for Ghana-da to keep his promise.

This idea of a Mars repopulated by the descendants of Bengalis¹¹ can be read as a reversal of colonialism and the numerous adventure narratives in which “native” females become consorts to the white male colonizer. Firstly, the power hierarchy with the colonizer in a dominating position is reversed as Ghana-da and his companions are at utterly at the mercy of these technologically superior Martian ladies¹², who are more likely to treat them ill than not. Secondly, it is again, and *only* within this fiction, that Ghana-da, a figurehead of the (imaginary) Bengali hero can remain at the center of the universe, not allowing his position to be usurped by the European mad-scientist Ludvic and the many antagonists who deride him because of his race.

In terms of the truth/falsity of the tall-tales of Jorkens and Ghana-da on the level of “representation of the other”, then, while Jorkens largely resorts to exotic stereotypes, Ghana-da presents a factually accurate and realistic account of the power relations between different

¹¹ Bengaliness as a marker of identity and pride is underscored repeatedly in this novel; moreover, not once in his long career does Ghana-da refer to himself as *Bharatiya* or Indian, always preferring to identify himself as Bengali. In fact, the very adventure to Mars begins when Ghana-da has to find a suitable replacement for two actors in plays by Rabindranath Tagore which were scheduled for performance in Gujarat. If the performances failed, it would besmirch the Bengali pride. This is important in the context of regional politics within the Indian Union, rife even before political independence. The “*baniyas*” or traders from Gujarat who had settled in Bengal since the eighteenth century were simultaneously derided for their business-mindedness and lack of intellectualism and envied for their increasing dominance in all aspects of social life by the Bengali middle-class. Satyajit Ray’s detective Feluda’s stories also represent this tension and rivalry.

¹² This is the only story with Ghana-da as hero that features female characters. This is not to say that female characters are completely unrepresented in *all* of Mitra’s SF: the Mahabharata stories, *Robinson Crusoe was a Woman* and the stories of his ancestors, along with *Manu Dwadosh*, have strong female characters who shape the trajectory of the stories. As mentioned earlier, the majority of Ghana-da’s SF tall-tales were published in young-adult magazines, and despite the fact that they deal with mature issues like racism and ecological conservation, the possibility of directly dealing with sexuality was (and continues to be) not readily accepted within the Bengali social milieu. The second likely reason for entirely excluding female characters, and this is as true for Ghana-da as for Professor Shanku and Professor Nat Boltu Chakra, is that these “heroes” were modeled on existing templates from adventure and detective fiction, who, like Sherlock Holmes, Allan Quatermain and Professor Challenger, largely operated in an universe with negligible female presence.

In *Ghana-da in Mars*, he delicately side-tracks the question of sexuality by conjecturing that Martians cannot be blamed for adopting polygamy like the Mormons or the *kuleen* Brahmans (a stereotypical figure in Bangla culture and literature; a doddering old Brahmin notorious for marrying numerous girls for dowry). When the question of inter-species reproduction is raised, Ghana-da similarly posits the possibility that the Martians were our ancestors, thus negating it. Overall, even though Ghana-da is not stereotypically masculine, he adheres to the ideologies of heteropatriarchy.

peoples of the world, and in encounters with extraterrestrial aliens, subverts colonialist ideologies implicit in much “alien-encounter” SF.

Truth/Falsity: Use of Science

Jorkens considers the finding and hunting of “abu laheeb” a scientific enterprise, one that he, as a representative of the civilized and scientific “west” is supremely equipped to perform—

Of all the steps Science had taken from out of the early darkness toward that distant point of which we cannot guess, which shall be full of revelations to man, one of her footsteps would be due to me. I could, as it were, write my name on that one footprint, and no one would question my right to. (*In the Land of Time*, 271-72)

“Man”, here, is of course the “white man”. Instead of interacting with the ethnic peoples of Sudan or gathering their narratives about the “abu laheeb”, Jorkens relies on a reticent white settler for his information, who is the only person that approaches this “most interesting point of zoology in the proper spirit of a scientist” (*In the Land of Time*, 268) . Neither is Jorkens’ desire to rename the “abu laheeb” “*Prometheus Jorkensi*” and “to shoot him and to bring his huge skin home” at odds with this scientific enterprise (*In the Land of Time*, 272-73).

Firstly, his project of renaming the creature would effectively isolate it from the tales and legends of the “Dinkas and Shilooks”, which are always already discredited as tall-tales, and insert it within a (pseudo-)Linnaean biological classification, thus providing it a scientific validity that is not attributed to the tales of the natives¹³. As Chattopadhyay argues, “Bruno Latour’s assertion is fully realized in this brief fiction, not as science but as the cultural claim of scientific knowledge which transforms the local into something abstract and fitted into the body

¹³ Latour explains, referencing the 18th century French explorer Jean François de Galaup, comte de Lapérouse, in *Science in Action*:

“...the implicit geography of the natives is made explicit by geographers; the local knowledge of the savages becomes universal knowledge of the cartographers; the fuzzy, approximate and ungrounded beliefs of the locals are turned into a precise, certain and justified knowledge” (216).

of scientific data whose unquestioned master is the white colonizer.” (“Aliens”). The entire network of connections—the landscapes and peoples—built around the novum are validated as “truth” and the falsity of the tall-tale lies only in the novum, ie. the insertion of a creature called “abu laheeb” within the paradigm of biological classification created in the “west”, and this fiction becomes a tall-tale *only* because Jorkens is unable to capture or photograph it.

Secondly, killing the last specimen of an endangered species as the only proof of it ever having existed does not seem problematic to Jorkens. The hunting of exotic animals was an accepted practice within the “western” scientific community for research purposes as was being a *shikari* in Asia or Africa. While wildlife conservation by law is a more recent phenomenon, it is surprising the Jorkens shows no moral cognizance of it. Of course, Jorkens does not finally kill the “abu laheeb” because he could not “bring myself...to shoot a creature that shared that great secret with us”, his magnanimity stems not from moral or ecological concerns but from “shared secrets” or commonality, ie. the use of fire (*In the Land of Time*, 273). In other words, had the “abu laheeb” been any other creature, Jorkens would have had no compunction in hunting it down. In contrast, many of Ghana-da’s stories are directly concerned with ecological conservation, especially of marine life, and while he dons the disguise of a *shikari* many times, only in one story is he directly responsible for taking the life of a wild creature and that too under great duress. The importance of being ecologically and environmentally conscious cannot be overstated today and Mitra’s recognition of and active advocacy for these issues well before it became fashionable adds another interesting angle to how science is used, or not, in service of preserving the natural world within which all of us must exist.

Ghana-da’s stories differ significantly from Jorkens in other uses of science as well. This may be partly attributed to the contrasting intentions of Dunsany and Mitra in creating their

fictional characters. Where Dunsany's stated aim is to "add strangeness to parts of our planet, just as it was tending to grow too familiar", Mitra admits "Ghana-da is a teller of tall tales, but the tales always have a scientific basis; I try to keep them as factually correct and authentic as possible" (Dunsany *The Travel Tales*, v; Mitra interview with SPAN, 1:9). Except only for the element of the novum, Jorkens usually resorts to imperialist and orientalist stereotypes to defamiliarize the familiar, while Ghana-da resorts to a network of factual details to set up the novums. While Jorkens extrapolates on the very paradigm of scientific knowledge, Ghana-da, for the most part, operates within the established paradigm. One of the ramifications is that Ghana-da does not presume to rename any of the "others" he encounters; another is that he successfully interrogates the paradigm from within, especially in the later stories.

This is signaled by Ghana-da's liberal use of cognitive dissonance¹⁴ to introduce the novum-ideas, usually in one of two ways. For instance, in "Glass," Ghana-da claims "Do you know, if it weren't for this piece of broken glass the first atom bomb would have dropped on London and not on Hiroshima and Nagasaki?" (1:28). The unexplained and unexpected causal chain of events between a piece of broken glass and an atom bomb dropped on London invite much amusing and sarcastic speculation from his four housemates Shibu, Shisir, Gour, and Sudhir. In other stories, a similar effect is achieved when Ghana-da drops tongue-twisters like *Cephenomyia pratti* or *Cynolebias bellottii*, which are linguistically and conceptually incomprehensible to his immediate audience and reader, and which his housemates attempt to deconstruct, often with hilarious results.

¹⁴ "Cognitive dissonance, the mental conflict that occurs when beliefs or assumptions are contradicted by new information. The unease or tension that the conflict arouses in people is relieved by one of several defensive maneuvers: they reject, explain away, or avoid the new information; persuade themselves that no conflict really exists; reconcile the differences; or resort to any other defensive means of preserving stability or order in their conceptions of the world and of themselves. The concept was developed in the 1950s by American psychologist Leon Festinger and became a major point of discussion and research." "Cognitive dissonance: Psychology", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, britannica.com

The point of surprise arises from the fact that the reader and Ghana-da's immediate audience are unfamiliar with or cannot imagine the application of these principles under the given circumstances. Here, it must also be acknowledged that access to information, not to mention exposure to SF as a genre, was quite limited for the typical Bengali reader before television or the internet revolution. Bengali middle-class homes got the television in the late 1980s, personal computers in the late 1990s, and internet service around 2005, though the last remains spotty even in major metropolitan cities; Mitra passed away in 1988. The frame storyworld describes the painstaking efforts made by Ghana-da's four narratees to retrieve snippets on scientific discoveries from newspapers, periodicals, and encyclopedias from the local library. Mitra's contemporary Bengali authors and critics also agree that the Ghana-da stories were the most entertaining and easily accessible way to keep abreast of current scientific breakthroughs and interesting factoids.

From an even broader perspective, while George Basalla's influential "west- to- east" diffusion model of scientific knowledge has been widely critiqued by contemporary historians of science like Ray McLeod, it remains statistically undeniable that much groundbreaking new research continues to be conducted in "western" Europe or USA; for instance, even in 2014, USA took out 509,622 patents to India's 22,458. (Basalla 611; "Statistical Country Profiles"). So, the question of what constitutes fact, or the politics of the channels via which such fact may be accessed, becomes crucial, especially for the lay reader who is not a scientist and hence not a part of what Ludwik Fleck calls the "esoteric" circle of insiders (Fleck 45). Interestingly, just as Ghana-da sometimes functions as a mediator in encounters between the friendly whites and the indigenous peoples, here too, he bridges the gap between the exoteric circle of the nonscientist, lay Bengali reader (represented by the four narratees in the text) and the esoteric circle of

scientists producing new and interesting knowledge about the phenomenal world. So the conceptual, if not factual, newness of these obscure scientific principles to Ghana-da's immediate reader does perhaps posit them as novums at the outset.

Further, Ghana-da vastly exaggerates the significance of these scientific facts and sometimes resorts to theories already discredited by the scientific community. By extrapolation, too, he brings them within the pale of SF novums in a Suvinian sense of "cognitive estrangement." For instance, in "*Kada*" ("Mud"), he uses a speck of mud from his jeans to save a friend's Brazilian ranch suddenly infested with DDT resistant, gigantic mosquitoes (2: 90-91). That speck of mud contained eggs of the *Cynolebias bellottii* or Argentine Pearlfish, a species known to feed on mosquito eggs and larvae (Bay 846). In just a single monsoon season, the fish grow to exponential numbers, flood the rivers and devour the mosquitoes. Again, in "*Maacchi*" ("Fly"), he exploits the supersonic speed of the "fastest insect," *Cephenomyia pratti* or the deer botfly, to escape an underground cave in the Cameroonian Mandara Mountains (Langmuir 234; 1: 322). While the claim to this fly's supersonic speed was proposed in 1927 and debunked in 1938, well before the publication of the story, use of the discredited version exaggerates the effects of the fiction and arouses wonder and amazement.

A majority of these novums also engage directly with contemporary ecological and social concerns. For instance, in "*Chokh*" ("Eyes"), Ghana-da discovers a new population of *Lutra lutris*, the sea otter species indiscriminately killed for their luxurious fur, which was "last seen in 1830," and prevents the Chinese smuggler Ching Sun from exterminating them to add to his profits (1: 354). In "*Kanta*" ("Thorns", 1972), Ghana-da saves the Pacific by privileging an ecological solution over a mechanical or toxic one. In order to save coral reefs from being devoured by the crown-of-thorns starfish, he advises the Pacific Command (ie. the United States

Pacific Command (USPACOM)) to reintroduce their natural predator, the *Charonia triton* sea snail, which had been endangered by uncontrolled hunting of these snails for their luxury conch shells (1: 113). In another story, “*Tol*” (“Polywater”, 1969) he foils American entrepreneur Captain Donut’s attempt to infect normal water with “polywater”, which exhibited anomalous properties such as higher boiling points and lower freezing points. The “polywater gap” had become a public scare in the USA by the late 1960’s and while polywater was discredited as a new compound only a few years after the publication of “*Tol*”, this tall-tale engages with contemporary concerns while parodying the stereotype of the villainous American entrepreneur (See Stormberg, “The Curious Case of Polywater”).

Ghana-da’s stories also interrogate the scientific paradigm from within by confronting the “superstitions” of the ethnic peoples he encounters, quite unlike Jorkens’ stories and the plethora of adventure stories with white, male *shikaris* as protagonists. While these latter dismiss superstitions outright, Ghana-da’s strategy is to insert himself within that particular line of reasoning and undermine their logic by the application of scientific principles and using them to his own advantage. For instance, in “*Maachh*” (“Fish”), he and his friend the scientist Dr. Hill are captured by “thousands of *jonglees* (primitive/barbaric forest-dwellers) in bizarre multi-coloured body paint” who cannot decide whether to burn or boil them alive, all because Dr. Hill had cured the leader’s migraines with aspirin, earning the enmity of the priests and witchdoctors. As an agent of what MacLeod calls “imperial science”, Ghana-da co-opts the scientific enterprise, and perhaps sows a germ of disbelief in the magical powers of witchdoctors who exploit and oppress their followers in the name of tradition. In this, Ghana-da (and Mitra) would likely have agreed with Meera Nanda’s assessment that “[w]e prefer the cold, objective facts of science to the comfortable, situated knowledge of our ancestors for the simple reason that we refuse to

subordinate what is good to what is ours” (“Epistemic Charity” 299). But Ghana-da’s role is not to “educate” or “civilize” these ethnic peoples; it is mostly limited to rescuing his magnanimous but socially clueless scientist friends.

Ghana-da says, “Just like the rest of the world, these *jonglees* too considered pretentiousness and tricks highly” (1: 71). The leader is not entirely ungrateful to Dr. Hill for curing his migraine, and allows them to choose the time of their death. Ghana-da then frames his escape plan by arguing that Dr. Hill, given his fair colouring, had descended from the moon and will demonstrate his power by controlling it. Of course, he knows that a lunar eclipse is imminent; however, the plan is foiled when it suddenly becomes cloudy and the witchdoctors claim that their power drew in the clouds. Just as Ghana-da and Dr. Hill are about to be executed, Ghana-da notices a catfish floundering in a jar and remembers that Japanese scientists have noted that these catfish predict earthquakes. He again counters the witchdoctors’ argument with his own, playing into their reasoning while basing his inference on scientific fact—because the moon was veiled, Dr. Hill was now furious and would retaliate by shaking the earth. Soon enough, there is an earthquake and they are finally able to escape. By reframing the narrative of superstitions and supra-natural powers within a scientific paradigm, the story serves both to question unstated assumptions about knowledge and power, and familiarize an exotic culture and its world-view by referring to a common human trait, that of being easily bedazzled by ostentation.

A handful of Ghana-da’s stories provide plausible scientific explanations for tropes that fall squarely within the SF and Science-Fantasy megatext, for instance, El-Dorado, the Loch Ness Monster, Yetis, UFO’s, spaceships that travel through the tesseract (four-dimensional Euclidean space) and of course, aliens and life on Mars. These stories are easily recognizable as

SF on the basis of family resemblances, and they present the most current scientific theories on the relevant topics in an engaging and entertaining manner.

Thus while Jorkens' stories rely on the utterly implausible for their novums, Ghana-da resorts again to scientific fact as a basis on which to extrapolate his fictions. In terms of the layers of truth/falsity, then, Jorkens begins with a layer of truth in his character as a storyteller and on to two layers of falsity, of which the first, ie. representation of the cultures of travelled lands, is perceived as truth by his immediate audience (while being verifiably false), while the novum is the only point of disbelief. In contrast, Ghana-da's stories have an opposite movement; beginning with total disbelief in his narratees/audience, to factual and verifiable details, to accepted scientific facts, and only in the exaggeration or the extrapolation does the novum become implausible.

The Frame Storyworld

This refers to the plot and world outside the tall-tale. It is distinct from the spatio-temporal locations of the tall-tales and there are no SF elements in this part of the narrative, with the exception of the novum as stated as a proposition, for example, "Do you know, if it weren't for this piece of broken glass the first atom bomb would have dropped on London and not on Hiroshima and Nagasaki?" in "*Kaanch*". Ghana-da narrates his tall-tales to the rapt audience of Shibu, Shishir, Gaur and Sudhir at 72 Banamali Naskar Lane and this location is contemporaneous and verisimilar to "real" world society and culture Kolkata. In the later stories, this part of the narrative becomes longer and more convoluted plot-wise, while the portion of the tall-tale shrinks somewhat. This, as Mitra's Bengali critics suggest, was a result of his increased

interest in the *Mahabharata* as well as his failing health and eyesight, which did not allow him to research scientific topics as rigorously.

Just as the tall-tales perform a critique of colonial ideologies while upholding a moral universe where Ghana-da co-opts the “scientific enterprise” to become a saviour of humans and nature alike, the frame storyworld is a representative critique of Bengali culture and society. Replete with contextual details like the furor over Mohunbagan-East Bengal¹⁵ soccer matches, chess or wrestling competitions at neighbourhood “clubs”, rising prices of foodstuffs and political unrest in West Bengal (*mastans*¹⁶, *bandhs*¹⁷), this location “grounds” the tall-tale and is for the most part, an accurate, humorous and self-reflexive representation of culture and society in Kolkata in the decades after independence. The most striking aspects of the frame storyworld, which ironically and self-reflexively represent some features peculiar to Bengali middle-class culture, are: the practice of *adda*, the location of the *mess-bari*, the fascination with food and the importance of “keeping up appearances”.

The *adda*

Adda is “the practice of friends getting together for long, informal and unrigorous conversations”, “seen as something quintessentially Bengali”, intrinsically connected to “metaphysical notions of ‘life’ and ‘vitality’”, and a source of nostalgia (Chakraborty 124).

¹⁵ Soccer was the sport of choice for many Bengali men in the decades after independence. “east” Bengal Football Club (est. 1920) is mostly supported by those who had come from Bangladesh (*bangal*) while Mohun Bagan Athletic Club (est. 1889) has mostly *ghoti* (native to the “west”ern part of undivided Bengal) supporters. Two of the four narratees are from the erstwhile “east” Bengal-Dhaka and Khulna, while the other two are native to “west” Bengal-Hugli and Bardhaman. Ghana-da himself shows no particular interest in football.

¹⁶ Literally, goon. But the term is also commonly used for party cadres and petty leaders of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), which was the ruling party in “west” Bengal between 1977-2011. In “*Ghana-da ke vote deen*” (“Vote for Ghana-da”, 1965) two local leaders try to bully Ghana-da to be a candidate for municipal elections.

¹⁷ A cessation of work. These *bandhs* or strikes would become rampant in the later years of CPI(M) rule, with different worker’s unions arbitrarily calling off public services, especially transportation. In a few of the later stories, the four have to stay home because of some random *bandhs*.

While the practice has been criticized for “promoting laziness”, it was also a relief from the workplace routine and the mundane cycle of domestic chores for Bengali middle-class men (125). It was “almost a zone of comfort in capitalism”, where idle discussions were seen as a source of intellectual enrichment in topics ranging from politics to sports to literature (163). In a similar vein, Debarati Sen argues “casual conversations and gossip are common in many societies, but the creative performance of this genre by Bengali elites made *adda* a marker of an urban middle-class identity, especially in response to the cultural hegemony of British imperialism” (521). The tall-tales respond to “the cultural hegemony of British imperialism” by engaging directly with stereotypes associated with the “east”. Responses to stereotypes occur on at least two other levels within the frame storyworld: stereotypes that other Indians associate with the Bengalis and the reflexive, often denigrating humour, irony or satire directed towards Bengali self-hood.

Even though Mitra rarely uses the word *adda* to refer to the get-togethers, preferring “*ashor*” or “gathering”, it is within this milieu that glorifies *adda* that Ghana-da’s performance as a teller of tall-tales needs to be contextualized. Like the typical *adda*, this “*ashor*” provides a space for intellectualism and imagination for its own sake, for instance, when Ghana-da transforms objects from his immediate surroundings to novum-ideas, like *Mosha* (Mosquito), *Nudi* (Pebble), *Tupi* (Cap), *Chhodi* (Walking-stick), *Daant* (Teeth) etc. This is a satire on/ a caricature of the Bengali cultural stereotype of the “armchair-adventurer”, who convincingly tells tales of faraway adventures without stepping out of his house; ie. a knowledgeable yet lazy person who is afraid of the actual rigors of travelling outdoors. However, unlike the typical *adda*, which promotes some form of free, democratic speech between peers, Ghana-da, being the teller of the tales, retains a hierarchical advantage. The efforts of his audience are usually geared towards dropping the right hint (usually some hastily-learned scientific gibberish) to get the story

started, and having accomplished that, they take turns to encourage and ridicule the adventures depending on its level of incredulity and Ghana-da's mood. A cyclic cold war often ensues between the telling of one story and the next, as Ghana-da withholds his performance until his conditions and demands, usually some insignificant thing, have been met by the four. The four narratees, in turn, seem to expend all their available energy in trying to elicit a story from Ghana-da.

The *mess-bari*

The location of these performances also transforms the dynamics of the typical *adda*. Ghana-da's near-contemporary *dadas* of Bangla fiction, like Gourkishore Ghosh's Braja-da or Narayan Ganguli's Teni-da, choose relatively public spaces, like a run-down publisher's office, or the roadside *rowk* or porch, respectively, for their *addas*. The patron-specific *addas* of the turn of the century usually gathered in the living rooms of Bengali intellectuals, which can be characterized as a semi-public space separate from the private accommodations of the patron and his family (see "Adda"). In contrast, the location of Ghana-da's performance is limited to either the sitting room or his own private room at the *mess-bari* at 72 Banamali Naskar Lane. The *mess-bari* is a kind of boarding house where students and office workers from the outskirts of the city reside during the week, to attend work or college, returning to their homes during weekends¹⁸. Except for occasional evening walks by the lake in the later stories, Ghana-da rarely steps out of the *mess-bari*, and his home-boundedness amplifies the incongruity between his character in the tall-tales and his character in the frame storyworld.

¹⁸ With the sole exception of Shibu, none of the other central characters of 72 Banamali Naskar Lane ever refer to going home or visiting relatives.

The space itself is neither openly public nor entirely private. The four narratees sometimes invite outsiders in (ultimately futile) efforts to outwit Ghana-da, but these visits are, with a few exceptions, by invitation only. The living room or *baithak-khana* is freely used by all the boarders in the *mess-bari*, and is part of their lived space¹⁹. And when Ghana-da, often sarcastically referred to as “*tong’er ghorer*²⁰ *tini*,” or “the veritable elder who resides in the room on the terrace,” descends to occupy his favorite armchair there, it signals the joyous beginnings of another tall-tale. While we do not get glimpses into the private accommodations of the four narratees, Ghana-da’s own room is rarely out of bounds: it is a semi-private space wherein Ghana-da’s own privacy is hardly acknowledged. Thus, in the few instances when Ghana-da does literally “close the door”, it signals a metaphorical rejection as well, signaling his anger and displeasure at the four. This selective use of isolation is certainly reminiscent of the many instances in Bangla (and other) folklore where the princess or queen would bar their doors and stop eating until they got the king to do their bidding. Of course, Ghana-da *never* rejects his meals, and in these instances, the cook Rambhuj and the all-errands-man Banwari act as intermediaries between the two factions, effectively mimicking the role of the *sakhi* or handmaiden as message-bearers.

¹⁹ “Lived space (spatiality) is felt space. Lived space is a category for inquiring into the ways we experience spatial dimensions of our day-to-day existence... lived space is the existential theme that refers us to the world or landscape in which human beings move and find themselves at home. When we want to understand a person we ask about his or her world, profession, interests, background, place of birth and childhood, etc.... There are cultural and social conventions associated with space that give the experience of space a certain qualitative dimension. We notice this, for example, in the space people feel that they need around themselves to feel comfortable or intimate.”

“Spatial Reflection”, *Phenomenology Online*, phenomenologyonline.com

²⁰ The *tong-er ghor* is a single room on the terrace on the highest floor, still found in buildings constructed prior to the proliferation of *flat-baris* or apartment buildings in Kolkata.

The fascination with food

Food occupies quite the central space in the frame storyworld, as it does in the Bengali psyche and in the popular perception of Bengalis as “foodies”²¹. It is also interesting how Mitra articulates his characterization of Ghana-da by referring to food metaphorically. Mitra admits, in an interview for *Anandamela* in 1983—

While writing science-based stories, [I] needed a hero. As we see, foreign science-fiction heroes are both knowledgeable and physically strong. I made an ordinary rice-eating Bengali my hero. He is so powerful on a diet of rice from the Kolkata *mess-bari* that no one can withstand the power of his words. (2: 8)

The intrinsic connection between the two functions of the mouth, ie. telling stories/ imparting knowledge and consuming food is implicit here. As for the “rice-eating” or “*annabhuk*” Bengali, there is the less-flattering description of the *bheto Bangali*, someone who is as insipid as plain cooked rice, and it is in this iteration that the office-going, routine-bound, middle-class Bengali is mocked and stereotyped by both Bengali intellectuals²² and other regional communities in India. Moreover, to the international reader, the irony and sarcasm in the penultimate sentence is perhaps lost in (cultural) translation—food provided in the various *mess-baris*/boarding houses/ hostels for students and office workers is often unpalatable and sometimes barely edible. While this is not the case in the specific instance of 72 Banamali Naskar Lane, for the ordinary Bengali reader, it is indeed a great feat to become a *hero* on *mess'er bhat* or the rice served in a *mess-bari*!

²¹Bengalis are stereotypically associated with *rosogolla* (a sweet made from cottage cheese) and *maachh-bhat* (fish curry and rice). For instance, see “11 stereotypes about Bengalis”.

²² The figure of the *kerani* or office-clerk as a symbol of the degeneration of Bengali pride and glory (from the days of the freedom-fighting martyrs and Nobel-winning poets and scientists) is a common trope in Bangla mainstream literature as well. In contrast to this figure who is always burdened by responsibility and routine, there is the (imaginary) figure of the artist or creator, who is beyond such mundane tasks. Of course, this dichotomy is not unique to Bengali culture and literature.

Indeed, the condition of eliciting a tall-tale from Ghana-da is largely dependent on the quality and quantity of the best food from the kitchen and the market almost magically lining up in front of him. From pillow-sized *kabiraji*²³ and prawn cutlets to Chinese fried rice to tandoori chicken to pastries and cream-rolls to South-Indian *utthapam*²⁴ to the more homely *telebhaja*²⁵, *kosha mangsho*²⁶ and *tel-koi*²⁷, the list is endless. Lila Majumdar humorously analyzes Ghana-da's fascination with food as that of a glutton and not a gourmet, owing to his utter disinterest in the cuisines of the faraway places he visits or how food is prepared in the kitchen or restaurant. She finds Shibu, Shishir, Gaur and Sudhir guilty of egging Ghana-da on by providing these unhealthy delicacies as bait, as they well knew the way to a man's heart is through his stomach²⁸. In a few instances, the novums of the tall-tales stem from food as well. For instance, the story of *Maachh* would have remained untold had Shibu not insisted that Ghana-da be served (bland and tasteless) catfish stew (*magur maachher jhol*²⁹) in keeping with his pretend-invalid status, while everyone else at the table partook of the delectable *mangsher kalia*³⁰. Ghana-da refuses said catfish stew, on account of the fish having once saved his life, and launches into the aforementioned tale, after, of course, having consumed two heaped servings of the mutton curry and several types of sweetmeats.

²³ Minced chicken cutlets fried in eggs.

²⁴ Several kinds of rice and pulses fermented and ground to a batter, then fried like pancakes with vegetable toppings.

²⁵ A very popular evening snack in Bengal. Vegetables like eggplant, cauliflower or onions are deep-fried in a gram-flour batter. Also very popular, and often included in the category of *telebhaja*, is the *chop*, or small croquets made with boiled potatoes/ other vegetables/ boiled eggs /prawns, dipped in egg and breadcrumbs before deep-frying.

²⁶ Spicy Mutton or Chicken curry with very little gravy.

²⁷ Considered a delicacy. *Koi* or the climbing gourami (not identical to goldfish-koi) is a freshwater fish infamous for its many tiny bones and ability to "walk" on land. *Tel-koi* is cooked in a gravy of mustard oil, ginger paste and yogurt.

²⁸ See Lila Majumdar, "*Ghana-dar Bhojon Bilash*" ("Ghana-da's fascination with food"). Majumdar argues that anyone can be made to do anything if their voracious appetite is catered to, and this is not a "bad thing" as it results in fascinating stories.

²⁹ *Magur* or the freshwater walking catfish is commonly cooked in light, almost tasteless gravy, for patients recuperating from illness or surgery.

³⁰ Rich and spicy mutton curry.

The importance of “keeping up appearances”

This peculiarly middle-class “keeping up of appearances” is a common trope in much realist fiction; in some instances, it is the financial decline of the aristocratic class which they are at pains to conceal from the rest of high society; in others, middle-class protagonists strive to retain “respectability” in the face of unemployment and poverty. In Ghana-da’s case, his housemates (and consequently the reader) know nothing about his personal background and even the suggestion of him engaging in any economically productive activity is shocking. He does not do any household chores³¹ or pay for rent or repairs or groceries; his existence in the *mess-bari* is entirely parasitic and dependent on the earnings of his four housemates³². While he has no qualms in borrowing thousands of cigarettes from Shishir or having them pay for his *amboori tamak*³³, not to mention all the delicacies he consumes, he is however not an ungrateful miser³⁴. In “*Bhela*” (“Raft”, 1984), when he receives Rs. 50 in the mail, supposedly from an indebted acquaintance, he is generous enough to let the four buy evening snacks with it. Of course, the money was actually Shishir’s, and the ruse with the mail was a ploy to elicit a story from Ghana-da.

Ghana-da is also surprisingly bashful when it comes to his few well-worn personal effects, be it his reading glasses, clothes, knick-knacks or dentures. Since they share the same

³¹ The concept that men should do household chores, i.e. women’s work, is still quite discomfiting to the typical middle-class Bengali family. The only chore that men are supposed to do well is the daily visit to the local market for fresh foodstuffs and Shibu, Shishir, Gaur and Sudhir take turns for that. Usually, in all-male spaces like the *mess-bari*, all the other chores were done by male servants who would also resided there, in this case, the all-errands-man Banwari and the cook Rambhuj. Their names indicate that they are migrants from Bihar or Uttar Pradesh.

³² While the reader is not given any details about their workplace or even the kind of work they do, it can be conjectured, from clues like they leave the *mess-bari* in the morning and return in the evening, and that most stories get told during the weekends over lavish dinners and high-teas, that the four do some kind of a 9am -5pm job.

³³ An aromatic Turkish tobacco, smoked in the hookah.

³⁴ A miserly attitude is often stereotypically associated with Bengalis.

lived space, it often becomes difficult for Ghana-da to conceal his near-poverty³⁵ and (physical) frailty from the four, and in each instance, he deflects the issue by spinning another tall-tale. For instance, in “*Kada*” (“Mud”, 1968), when one of Ghana-da’s shirts are accidentally sent to the dry-cleaners along with everyone else’s wash, he is furious and berates them—presumably because he is afraid that he’d be asked to pay—that he was perfectly content with the cleanliness of his clothes after washing them with soap, instead of at the expensive dry-cleaners (2: 83). Similarly in “*Chunch*” (“Needle”, 1958), he is caught red-handed mending one of his well-worn shirts³⁶, as he probably does not have the means to buy new ones (1: 206-207). In “*Daant*” (“Teeth”, 1955), when the four discover that Ghana-da uses dentures (presumably because of his age) and ridicule him, he justifies his frailty with a story where he willingly had his good teeth extracted to accommodate a hidden camera in his dentures for a spy mission (1: 139-140). Thus, even Ghana-da is reduced to the pettiness of living within his means, and these instances are as ironical, humourous and self-reflexive a portrayal of the unemployed and impoverished Bengali middle-class as any to be found in twentieth century Bangla fiction.

Appropriating Traditional Structures of Feeling

From the previous discussion, the dynamics of the inter-personal relationship between Ghana-da and his four housemates may be summarized as follows. Firstly, Ghana-da is an economic parasite and entirely dependent on the four for his room and board. Secondly, the

³⁵ Ghana-da’s worldly possessions, from a description of his room, consist of two dented trunks with peeling paint, a clothesrack, some shelves with knickknacks he received as gifts from the four, a hookah and its accessories, a few stools, a slatted bed frame and a set of bedding. See “*Chokh*” (“Eye”, 1: 348).

³⁶ Even though Ghana-da wears shirts, pants and jackets in his tall-tales, he is usually dressed in a *fatua* and *pajama* when he is at home, and he is mending a *fatua* here. A *fatua* is a mid-thigh length, half-sleeved light cotton shirt without buttons down the front and is usually paired with light cotton drawstring pajamas. This is common attire for Bengali men.

relationship between them is usually characterized as a cyclic “cold war”: the building up of tensions when Ghana-da refuses to tell stories, and its dissipation when Ghana-da is finally satisfied with their efforts. Thirdly, Ghana-da is hardly a peer to the other four, and retains a hierarchical upper-hand within the frame storyworld, as he does within the tall-tales. In the light of modern capitalism, or the three-and-a-half-decade hold of Marxism in “west” Bengal, or even the contemporary moment of globalization, this might seem to be an untenable, if not outright impossible, situation. How is it that Ghana-da, a financial parasite, retains a hierarchical upper-hand in the *mess-bari*, and how does this situation seem so commonplace to (Bengali middle-class) readers as to sustain Ghana-da’s popularity for over seven decades³⁷?

One way of approaching these questions is through Dipesh Chakrabarty’s and Debarati Sen’s arguments on how the performance of *adda* transformed notions of intellectualism and knowledge-formation for the Bengali middle-class male. The uneven penetration of capital in colonized cultures and the condition of what Pranab Chatterjee calls “ambivalent modernity” in the context of Bengal, where the capitalist work ethic is fractured or “split” by a conflicting tendency towards the anti-work ethic, stemming from the Hindu belief that the mortal life is illusory (*maya*) and hence working is meaningless, are perhaps the underlying conditions that make this improbable situation seem natural to the Bengali reader (162)³⁸. It is perhaps only

³⁷ In practically every interview on the topic, Mitra acknowledges Ghana-da’s popularity. There is a plethora of newspaper and magazine articles on Ghana-da in Bangla beginning from the 1950’s. There are at least five English and Hindi translations of his short story collections. The Ghana-da Club, a fan club devoted to him, was established in 1984 with several prominent literary figures of that time. The first volume of Ghana-da’s collected stories was reprinted seven times in ten years (2000-2010). In 2015, some enthusiasts utilized the popular social media platform Facebook to commemorate Ghana-da’s legacy, and that page has gathered over 3200 ‘like’s.

³⁸ Of course, the aspect of escapist wish-fulfillment, where the home-bound Bengali middle-class male could voraciously experience the world through Ghana-da’s adventures, has also been suggested by several critics as a chief reason for his enduring popularity. This kind of argument is in tune with the “rise and fall” mode of teleological history of Bengali elitism within the Indian Union. In this version, during the heyday of Bengal renaissance and with some implicit support from the British, Bengal was supposedly at the pinnacle of her intellectual glory—“What Bengal thinks today, India thinks tomorrow”. This was upturned first by shifting of governance to Delhi and the increasing importance of Hindi-speaking groups, and then the great success of Gandhi’s

within this milieu that is nostalgic of and glorifies *adda*, that Ghana-da's performance can generate *any* value to his audience that is commensurate with the complete lack of his economic contribution. This is neither charity nor hospitality on the part of the four narratees: if that were the case, Ghana-da would not have had the upper-hand in the power structure within the *mess- bari*. Neither is it mere leisure, or the down-time after the workday, as the four narratees are always actively trying to elicit a story from Ghana-da, even when he foils their plans for commonplace leisure activities like travelling or going to sports events. However, nostalgia alone does not explain Ghana-da's superior status, given that the numerous other *adda* storytellers in Bangla fiction, from Trailokyanath Mukhopadhyay's *Damrudhar* (1923) to Narayan Gangopadhyay's *Teni-da* (1946-1970), are unable to retain such hierarchical advantages solely through their storytelling performances.

Another, more contextually inflected, answer would be recognition of two linked structures of feeling embedded in the traditional-religious-musical culture of Bengali Vaishnavism, and of how this series appropriates this master narrative for a modern scientific-minded audience. These structures of feeling may be characterized as the postcolonial Indian audience/reader being "moved by a certain kind of narrative construction" or finding a "particular heightened mode of drama" to be "sublime": these "longings" have been silenced and fractured by colonialism but remain embedded in Indian cultural practice (Chandra 86). In the context of Bengal, the *Geetgovinda*³⁹, a twelfth-century Sanskrit lyric which became one of the

non-violent movement. By the first few decades after independence, Bengalis had been severed from most aspects of governance and policy-making at the national level. In addition, there were civil unrests, famines, the Partition of 1971 and the subsequent Marxist rule (opposed to the Congress Party at the center), which further alienated Bengalis from decision making activities at the national level. Burdened by rising unemployment and all the other problems of an unevenly developing infrastructure, the Bengali male had no resort but to resort to escapist wish-fulfillment through a character that was as lazy and parasitic as they were. See "*Omor Ghana-da*", 188-89.

³⁹ The *Geetgovinda* appears directly in the series as well: in "*Mandhatar Toop o Ghana-da*" ("Ghana-da and the Ancient Bait") the solution to the riddle of the Loch Ness Monster is inspired by a couplet from the *Geetgovinda*.

core texts of medieval Bhakti poetry and religious reform against orthodox, ritual-bound Hinduism, also greatly influenced Sri Chaitanya, the proponent of Bengal Vaishnavism in the 16th century (Jayadeva, “Introduction”). Simply put, the medieval Bhakti movement removed the intermediary of the priest and brought the devotee into a personal connection with his/her godhead of choice, usually Krishna. Vaishnavism remains the most popular form of Hindu religious practice in West Bengal even today, and though their religious-musical performances are seen as regressive by the leftist intellectual culture in Kolkata, images and tropes drawn from this tradition continue to inform popular worldviews and narratives.

In this literary-cultural context, it may be argued that the Vaishnava associations in Ghana-da’s name (Ghanashyam Das) and the location of the *mess-bari* (Banamali Naskar Lane) are not entirely coincidental (Mukhodadhyay 105). Shyam and Banamali are two of Krishna’s names and the Vishnavas commonly take “Das” (or “servant”) as their last name, irrespective of their status in the fourfold Hindu caste system. The real-world *mess-bari* which served as the template for Ghana-da’s fictional *mess-bari* is located at Govinda Ghoshal Lane in central Kolkata; Govinda is another of Krishna’s names, while Ghosal is a common last name within the Yadavs or the cowherd clan to which Krishna belonged (“Yadav”) ⁴⁰. The comparison can be extended even further: just as the characterization of Krishna as a diplomat and pragmatic leader in the *Mahabharata* contrasts with his characterization as an impulsive and playful man-god in the Puranic and folk/local traditions, the tall-tale and the frame story delineate a similar incongruity with respect to Ghana-da’s characterization (Voss Roberts 60).

⁴⁰ Of course, it is neither possible nor necessary to determine here whether Krishna was a historical figure, or whether the Yadavas of the *Mahabharata* are ancestors to the Yadavs today, but readers should recognize that a group of people trace their lineage from him.

Further, in *Das holen Ghana-da (Ghana-da Becomes Das/Servant)* Ghana-da's ancestor Ghanaram or Ganado ("cattle/livestock" in Spanish⁴¹) was sold as a slave to conquistadores; when released, he chooses the last name "Das" or "servant" so that his descendents never forget the history of slavery (3: 60-76). In the sequel, *Surjo Kandle Shona (Where the Sun Weeps Gold)*, Ghanaram tries to prevent the Spanish conquest of the Incan civilization and marries a Mayan princess. On returning to Bengal with a prophetic treatise, Ghanaram gives it to Krishnadas Kabiraj, the biographer of Sri Chaitanya, and likely prompts the poet to compose *Sri Chaitanya Charitamrita* shortly before Sri Chaitanya's death (3: 407-408). Thus Ghana-da's characterization points towards this narrative tradition, implying connections that would not necessarily be quickly recognized or acknowledged but which, it may be argued, still engender resonances in the contemporary Bengali reader.

Vaishnava theorist Rupa Goswami analyzed the process of culmination of the relationship between the devotee and the godhead as an unfolding of five *rasas* or "relished emotions," following the much longer Sanskrit tradition of the performative-poetic *rasas* formulated by Bharata in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and elaborated upon by commentators like Anandavardhana and Abhinavagupta. Rupa Goswami's theology proposed five *rasas*: *santa* (peaceful), *dāśya* (servitude), *sakhya* (love between friends), *vātsalya* (love of the parents towards their child) and *madhura* (love as between lovers). Each of these *rasas* mark stages in a progression of proximity of the devotee towards the godhead culminating in erotic love ("Transcendental Rasas"). Within this framework, the relationship between Ghana-da and his four housemates is within the *sakhya* or friendship paradigm, which, being a later stage, contains elements of *sānta* and *dāśya*. It also provides a different perspective in approaching Ghana-da's

⁴¹ The novella has a long explanation on how Ghanaram was rechristened "Ganado" by the conquistadores and treated like cattle/livestock.

narrative role, as Krishna's cowherd friends in folk or Puranic poetry are never on equal terms with him, despite the fact that Krishna always takes their belongings, makes them run errands and cover for his romantic dalliances (Roberts 65; *Śrī Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu* Prabhupada transl. "Fraternal Devotion").

Moreover, given the homosocial nature of *adda* as a practice, the *mess-bari* as lived space and the complete absence of romantic liaisons with women, Marsum Mukhopadhyay suggests that *sakhya*, in this instance, has the potential of developing to *madhura* or erotic love. Much 19th and 20th century colonial and postcolonial Indian literature, influenced by Victorian mores, has, broadly speaking, shied away from approaching homosocial or homoerotic relationships in critically substantive ways. In any case, a strong and potentially offensive argument (to the Bengali reader, at the least) on the homoerotic possibilities here is untenable since the relationship between Ghana-da and his audience is static and remains so throughout the series. Instead, in appropriating a pre-colonial structure of feeling which was theoretically somewhat looser than the rigid masculine-feminine/inside-outside boundaries demarcated all the more forcefully by colonization, this series implicitly encourages reexamination of gender binaries and roles, especially the figure of the hyper-masculine hero of much adventure fiction.

The second linked, if less apparent, structure of feeling derives from the *Geetgovinda* itself. The eternal cycle of *maan-abhimaan*, or the feigned anger of the beloved which the errant lover must overcome repeatedly, informs the narrative structure of the *Geetgovinda*. Here, Krishna is the errant lover who has to placate Radha for their long separation and his dalliances; in later Vaishnava poetry, the common man is the devotee who seeks the godhead Krishna in a similar fashion. The religious interpretation is that human erotic love is transformed into divine love in the process of the devotee/lover straying, seeking and finally being united with the

godhead/beloved (Jayadeva, “Introduction”). The secular interpretation is that pre-colonial Bengal, repeatedly ravaged by invasions by primarily Islamic groups from the north”west”, sought solace in this nearly pornographic material which could not be expressed as such due to social norms and standards of Sanskrit poetry which continued to influence poetic structure in the Indian languages (Chatterjee 163; Jayadeva, “Introduction”).

In this context, it may be argued that the interrelationship between Ghana-da and his four narratees follows that same cyclical structure of *maan-abhimaan* formulated by the *Gītagovinda* and popularized by the Vaishnavas. For instance, every time Ghana-da bars his door or threatens to leave the *mess-bari*, Shibu, Shisir, Gour, and Sudhir are traumatized even though they recognize it to be an empty threat; like Krishna’s beloved Radha, they cannot rest unless Ghana-da resumes speaking to them normally (for instance, see “Hole”, 1: 126). Within the frame storyworld, it is almost as if Ghana-da is elevated to the status of the godhead, with his four narratees as devotees, bending to his every whim. Reading the relationship in this manner provides a more persuasive rationale than nostalgia or anti-work ethic for Ghana-da’s upper-hand in all decisions made at the *mess-bari*: *it appeals to an entirely different structure of feeling*.

While drawing on these traditional structures of feeling, however, Mitra’s master-stroke is in substituting religious-devotional ecstasy with the search for knowledge, especially scientific knowledge, which becomes distinct from mere information-gathering via the narrative of the tall-tale. There is no overt religiosity within the texts, which aligns with the secular worldview so dear to Bengali intellectuals then and now; also, in giving a new twist to an old structure, the series draws in readers who would otherwise be less inclined to rehash religious-devotional tropes that sit uneasy in a postcolonial context. Even read in traditional Hindu terms, this seeking for knowledge is perhaps appropriate for the modern age, where the path of *bhakti* (devotion) is

trumped by the path of *jñāna/gyan* (knowledge) and the path of *karma* (work). Of the many reasons for Ghana-da's enduring popularity, this may be the least recognized and appreciated.

Conclusion

Premendra Mitra's Ghana-da series remains exceptional within Bangla SF and is certainly one of the more engaging examples of postcolonial SF from around the world. In utilizing the tall-tale narrative structure uncommon to a broad corpus of SF and setting the action in a world verisimilar to our own, the series opens up history itself to reexamination from postcolonial perspectives and interrogates notions of historicity through the world-saving deeds of an unconventional hero-figure who shatters the "passive east" stereotype. Rigorously scientific in the formulation of novums, Ghana-da utilizes known scientific principles while interrogating knowledge and power dynamics in the world at large. History and science remain the core concerns of this series within the tall-tale; the frame storyworld, on the other hand, provides humorous and self-reflexive vignettes of the decades immediately following Independence in Kolkata, and as such, serve to illuminate a light-hearted view of this history as well. Finally, considering the tremendous and enduring popularity of this series, I argue that the Ghana-da tales utilize two linked structures of feeling embedded in traditional narratives and the broader cultural consciousness peculiar to Bengal and India, by drawing upon their form but transforming the content from religious-devotional ecstasy to a search for scientific knowledge. Given the erasures and silencing of pre-colonial narratives and structures of feeling through two centuries of colonization and continuing into our present postcolonial moment, it is all the more vital to examine these unarticulated connections.

In the next chapter, I analyze the second kalpabigyan series that engages with historicity by setting its narratives in the past— Satyajit Ray's Professor Shonku's diaries.

Adventures with Science: The SF Series

CHAPTER II

SATYAJIT RAY'S PROFESSOR SHONKU SERIES (1961-90)

Satyajit Ray in Bangla Literature and Film

To connoisseurs of world cinema and those interested in South Asian cultures, Satyajit Ray (1921-1992) is likely one of the more recognized names. He remains the only Indian filmmaker to have won a Honorary Oscar for Lifetime Achievement (in 1992) and his fame as an Indian-Bengali intellectual is second perhaps only to Rabindranath Tagore. Along with scripting, directing and composing for critically acclaimed “realist” films like *The Apu Trilogy* (1950-59) and *Charulata* (1964), he also directed “*Goopy Gayine Bagha Bayine*” (1969), a satirical fantasy on coercive and ideological colonization, and popularized international SFF cinema in Kolkata by establishing the SF Cine Club.

Far less internationally known is his substantial body of literary fiction. Ray candidly admitted that his films were for an adult audience and when writing fiction he had older children and young adults in mind; regardless, the latter continue to be tremendously popular within Bengali readership of all ages (Mandal 98; Chakrabarty 70). Even though he began writing only in his 40's to resuscitate the Ray family publication *Sandesh*, he produced an impressive variety of *kishor sahitya* with accompanying illustrations, ranging from a long-running detective series (Feluda, 1965-92) to a long-running SF series (Professor Shonku, 1961-90) and several dozen

supernatural/horror and SF short stories. Most notable among these is “*Bankubabu’r Bandhu*” (“*Bankubabu’s Friend*” 1962) which became controversial as the source for Steven Spielberg’s *E.T* (1982) (see 1989 Interview/Documentary in English by French filmmaker Meny). Along with Premendra Mitra, Ray remains one of the foremost contributors to kalpabigyan (and genre fiction in Bangla).

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I analyze the thirty-eight complete diaries in Satyajit Ray’s Shonku series, published in *Sandesh* (1961-1974) and *Anandamela* (1976-1990), as it parallels the other two kalpabigyan series in interesting ways, and Ray’s other short stories did not offer as much scope for analysis. The central problematic of this series, I argue, is the relationship between science and mythology (the latter not limited to Hindu mythology, though these remain the most conspicuous). Using the personal diary as a narrative mode to intervene in the processes of history-making, I argue that the isolated postcolonial scientist Shonku negotiates an international scientific network while drawing inspiration from both “eastern” and “western” traditions, and in doing so, often suffers from a “peculiar postcolonial anxiety”. Similar to the Ghana-da series, there is little ambiguity in the ethical and moral parameters within this storyworld, and Shonku extends his affection, interestingly, not to humans or aliens, but to the “sub-human” “other”: a motley of ragtag animals that he treats almost as his children. The combination of these disparate elements, I argue, posit this series squarely within what Malmgren calls science fantasy, where “the scientific discourse ... serves to validate the counterscientific element, convincing us of its plausibility”, and utilizes “cognition effect” far more than the strict Suvinian concept of

“cognition” (“Towards a Definition of Science Fantasy” 261; *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* 18; *Seven Beauties* 140; see also Introduction).

In a short first section, “**What’s in Professor Shonku’s name?**” I discuss the etymological root and resonances that the very name of our protagonist, “Professor Shonku”, are likely to suggest to a readership with some familiarity with Hindu mythology, and how these elements coalesce to form a character-profile even as he is introduced. The second section, “**The diary**” is divided into three parts, where I analyze the employment of the diary as an anachronistic narrative form, serving as a point of departure to a no-time set in the seemingly verisimilar past, while simultaneously acting as a novum in its own right with qualities defying earthly expectations. The third section “**The lone scientist as protagonist: Interactions in a network**” maps interactions between the isolated genius Shonku and the world in broadening circles of familiarity, from his peculiar household, to odd neighbors, to local communities and finally to an international network of scientists and entrepreneurs. I argue that the different attitudes/levels of engagement not only reveal a deeply self-reflexive and often satirical approach to affairs of the “home”, but also a postcolonial anxiety admixed with self-assurance in dealings with the “world”.

In the fourth section, I characterize “**Use of science and the novum**” in two sets—the novum-tools and the novum-events— Shonku invents the former and is embroiled in the latter. The novum-tools, frugally constructed out of local ingredients alien to “western” science turn out to be far superior to his competitors’, subverting claims and practices of “Big Science” and upholding a subdued sense of nationalistic pride and humanistic ethical standards in the process. Neologism functions as a significant literary convention in this process, and I analyze, comparatively, instances from Sukumar Ray’s *Hñeshoram Hñushiyar*, which Ray credits as

having inspired Shonku. The novum-events similarly juxtapose mythical, fantastic and pseudo-scientific elements with ideas culled from the global SF-and-fantasy generic megatext. In so doing, I argue that the series foregrounds fictionality or imagination over narrowly conceived scientific truth or theory.

While the critical function of subversion cannot be overstated, it remains true that, as Andrew Robinson (an American critic of Ray's cinema) comments: "[Ray's] thoughts were as uninhibited by convention and his lack of higher scientific knowledge as were Tagore's" (*Inner Eye*, 299). Ray had little formal training in the sciences, and unlike Mitra, who meticulously researched the information before penning the Ghana-da stories, Ray was simply too busy with filmmaking to instill that kind of dedication into the Shonku series. In fact, the diffuse and often outright *unscientific* premises in the Shonku stories have been a matter of contention/ irreverence among Bengali critics, especially as he is seen as the most important Bengali cultural icon after Tagore (see "Shonku: A disenchanting exposition"). Even broadly, a tendency to downplay the rigorously scientific and foreground mythologizing (what Chattopadhyay calls the "mythologerm") may be identified in many instances of kalpabigyan after the Ghana-da series, where the most commonly offered axiom is that alien sciences or ancient/forgotten sciences are beyond the current state of modern human science. While this leaves room within the narratives both for an expansion of scientific knowledge and the evocation of a "sense of wonder" characterizing SF in general, on an extradiagetic level, the kalpabigyan tradition begins to resemble global SF in that its aim becomes less "education" and more "entertainment".

In the fifth and final section, "**A Rasa Analysis**", I draw upon the rasa theory to analyze the core emotive states invoked by this series. While rasa has been translated as "emotion" and may suggest purely subjective- psychological responses to the lay reader, it is not so; Bharata's

structured and formulaic aesthetics identify and provide performative/literary guidelines that have a broad, even universal, scope (see Chari, Patnaik). Identifying the core emotive components in this series as that of *adbhuta* (wonderful), *vīra* (heroic) and *hāsya* (comic) from Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra*, along with a secular approximation of *vātsalya* rasa or the emotion of parental affection from medieval Vaishnava theology, I analyze how these rasas are evoked and interact with each other, accentuating the positive response associated with *adbhuta*.

What's in Professor Shonku's name?

Two snippets of (Hindu) mythology are immediately identifiable merely by looking at the scientist's name: Professor Trilokeshwar Shonku. "Trilokeshwar", a Sanskrit derivative, literally means "master of the three *lokas* or celestial domains" (ie. heaven/space, earth and the underworld) and can be interpreted as conferring exactly those qualities on the character himself. He masterfully engages with all three domains in his adventures, including the underwater world ("*Raktamatsya Rahasya*", "Mystery of the Bloodfish", 1968) and the afterlife ("*Professor Shonku O Bhoot*", "Professor Shonku and the Ghosts", 1966). The name also draws explicitly on Hindu myth: in the last diary "*Swarnaparnee*" ("The Golden Leaves", 1990) a renowned German Sanskritist, Professor Steiner, enquires whether his name refers to "Vishnu, Shiva or Surya". Shonku admits that "I knew it referred to all three", but in a show of characteristic arrogance in his budding scientific reputation (or uncharacteristic humility in preferring to be identified with mortals instead of gods), Shonku self-identifies as an "Indian scientist" (628).

While the family name "Shonku" does not correspond to any of the common Bengali Hindu family names (Brahminical or otherwise), it is directly reminiscent of another Hindu myth

from the *Ramayana*, the story of King Trishanku, who wished to ascend to *swarga* or the abode of the gods in his mortal body. Enmeshed in the petty politics of the rival sages Vasistha and Viswamitra and the gods led by Indra, Trishanku was first cursed with untouchability and banishment by Vasistha's sons, then propelled upwards to *swarga* by Viswamitra, then forced back from entering the abode of the gods by Indra, till finally he came to rest upside down in a limbo between the two realms. Vishwamitra finally created a special heaven just for him where he continued to remain upside down but was also recognized as a celestial star (see "Indian Mythology: Trishanku's Heaven").

The Trishanku myth has been interpreted in several ways, and some of these resonate with the characterization of Professor Shonku as well. For one, it can be read as excessive pride in his own accomplishments which leads him to a sorry state on numerous occasions, escaping only by stroke of luck or external intervention. Another reading would relate to the state of being in limbo, especially of being neither happy nor unhappy, which is a desirable trait for human conduct in mortal affairs in Hindu and Buddhist theologies alike. Professor Shonku himself is not excessively swayed by emotions of happiness, sadness or anger and admits to being a level-headed person, though he does exhibit feelings of childlike excitement and fear/horror towards recent events on occasion. These somewhat contradictory elements add complexity to Shonku's characterization.

This melding of mythology and the modern "western" epithet "Professor" indicates, even before we start reading, a characterization that brings together these two apparently divergent worlds.

The diary: As narrative mode, novum and a point of departure to an alternate past

The diary as narrative mode

Borrowed from Europe, the diary as a narrative form has no indigenous predecessors in pre-colonial Bangla or Sanskrit literary fiction; while Mughal emperors and elite Muslim noblemen did keep diaries (in Arabic, Persian or Urdu), there is little indication that Ray draws on that. While early Anglo-American SFF liberally used the diary and other framing narrative devices to lend verisimilitude to non-realistic tales, in late twentieth century SF or science fantasy it may well be considered anachronistic.

As a narrative mode, the diary presents a contradiction: on the one hand, it imparts an immediacy to events as they are recounted in the first person soon after their occurrence; on the other, entries also appear contrived as the very act of writing down one's experiences necessitates that the narrator is safe and comfortable enough to engage in a leisure activity like writing. This allows for the ample use of foreshadowing as a dramatic device—almost every diary prefaces its last entry by exclamations on the horrifying turn of events or how close Shonku came to meeting an untimely end. As these stories usually involve the solving of multiple mysteries, this recurrent narrative device heightens suspense and propels the narrative forward. Moreover, the “real” diary is usually a personal record where the author freely reveals his/her intimate thoughts, strengths and weaknesses. The fictional diary uses this aspect to comment, often ironically, on the first-person narrator who remains oblivious to his own shortcomings. Here, the effect is often combined with the comic and the joke is on Shonku, who is often too arrogant to recognize his own shortfalls. The diary has been used in all these functions to

strengthen the verisimilitude effect in much realist (epistolary) and adventure fiction in 19th century European literature and it does the same here.

The diary as novum

When introducing the first and the third stories, Ray also uses a story-within-a-story device common to 19th century adventure fiction; namely, the diary presented to the reader by an editor of a “real” publication house, in this case, *Sandesh*. Professor Shonku’s first account, “*Byomjatrir Diary*” (“Diary of a Space-farer”, 1961) reaches the reader through the magnanimity of an unnamed editor who reluctantly publishes the story to help a poverty-stricken acquaintance who had retrieved it from a meteor-impact site.

The material of the diary itself exhibits astonishing qualities such as ink that changes color, extreme elasticity and being unharmed by fire or the chomping teeth of the pet dog. More astonishing, however, is that the diary is devoured by ants soon after the story goes to press; while the editor remains clueless, the imaginative reader has no difficulty in linking them to the unknown-to-human-science chemical properties of the diary itself, invented by the ant-like aliens of Tafa, Shonku’s final destination. The editor had planned to have the diary examined by scientists and exhibited in a museum; his plan is foiled by this whimsical/coincidental destruction of “evidence”. While this undermines the truth-claim of the fiction, “destruction of evidence” is not uncommon as a literary device in early SF and adventure fiction for consolidating the verisimilitude effect, which allows for the return to/continuation of an unchanged “home site” verisimilar to the “real” world after the occurrence of the adventure in other “exotic” locales.

In the third story, “*Professor Shonku o Haar*” (“Professor Shonku and the Bones”, 1964), the unnamed editor relates how after painstakingly tracking down Shonku’s lab, he was able to

recover twenty-one more diaries which he hopes to publish. None of these later diaries exhibit the material qualities of the first one, underscoring that the first diary was indeed alien in nature. This statement also presents one of many minor inconsistencies that pepper these narratives, as there are more than twenty-one diaries or stories; however, it seems likely that intervention by an external narrator establishing the verisimilitude effect was no longer necessary as the series became more popular.

The diary as a point of departure to an alternate past

According to the editor of *Sandesh* in the first story, the rumor goes that Professor Trilokeshwar Shonku, a famous scientist, had disappeared around fifteen years ago. He was known to have lived in Giridih, a suburb in the heart of Chhotanagpur plateau in present-day Jharkhand (erstwhile Bihar) and conducted his scientific experiments in an elaborate personal laboratory there. Considering that he leaves Earth for good in one final journey to Tafa, an alien planet, his first diary is also chronologically the last as the latter diaries chart his scientific career and adventures on earth. Interestingly, the very last published complete diary, “*Swarnaparnee*” (“The Golden Leaves”, 1990), is the tale of Shonku’s very first adventure as recounted from memory, of his first journey to Europe before WWII and the discovery of his arguably most important medicine *miracurool*. Thus a reverse chronology is established and from internal reference it is clear that some stories happen after others. However, as these diaries are dated by day and month but not year, it is impossible to construct a definitive sequence.

While Shonku’s storyworld is mostly verisimilar to our own, there is contradictory evidence that suggests that some novum-events open up alternate timelines. For instance, Shonku grows two inches taller after being shrunk to doll-size and resized to human proportions (“Professor Shonku and the Strange Doll”, 1965) and is rejuvenated by the mysterious properties

of the “lost world” Dungleung Do to appear twenty five years younger (“The Unicorn Expedition”, 1973). While these changes affect Shonku personally, the storyworld does not remain unscathed either. In “Professor Shonku and the UFO” (1982), he watches helplessly as a rival mad-scientist vaporizes one world heritage monument after another from a hijacked alien spaceship—the Parthenon, the Eiffel Tower, the Coliseum are all ground to dust and only the supernatural abilities of his companion Nakuṛ*babu* saves the Taj Mahal from a similar fate. While the choice of saving the most iconic of Indian monuments (dedicated to love, no less) speaks volumes on the patriotic, indeed nationalist pride that runs through the series, it is more interesting that the destruction of monuments, which would challenge the verisimilitude effect and instead posit this as a parallel/alternate universe, is not referred to again. As such, these disruptive novum-events do not act as true “jonbar points” and it is as if a “reset button” has been hit between one diary and the next, suggesting that these narratives occur in a temporal bubble or no-time.

Several other inconsistencies within the series timeline, moreover, suggest that irrespective of how verisimilar Shonku’s world appears to our own, it exists in a temporal bubble. For instance, considering that Shonku had disappeared fifteen years before the publication of the first story (1961) and that all his diaries were written prior to that, it can be expected that his adventures occurred sometime before 1945. However, from “*Swarnaparee*” we know that his first visit to Europe when he was only about twenty or twenty-five years old, occurs immediately before WWII, likely around 1935. But Shonku somehow ages to 65 in the space of ten years and only ages by a year in all of twenty-nine years, the duration of the publication of the diaries. Furthermore, verisimilar descriptions of international locations are essentialized (but not necessarily exoticised) vignettes of both natural wonders and urban conveniences in a more-or-less contemporaneous setting to the later decades of the twentieth century.

Apart from this single distinction, the storyworld here has remarkably weak links to “real” history as we know it. Historical events are rarely referenced and even then they only serve as a backdrop to new adventures: for instance, silence on the Chinese occupation of Tibet since 1959 in “The Unicorn Expedition” (1973) is quite deafening. Thus the reader is left with little recourse but to take an imaginative leap of faith into this no-time! However, it is perhaps only within this imaginary no-time that the scientific achievements an “isolated genius” from a postcolonial “periphery”, holding his own within the dominant “western” scientific paradigm, can be performed.

The lone scientist as protagonist: Interactions in a network

Just like the narrative mode of the diary, the figure of the “isolated genius” is anachronistic when placed within contemporary scientific practices—it harks back to an era when scientific research was a part of “natural philosophy” and the playing field of a few gifted individuals with ample resources. In that, Professor Shonku is quite akin to Newton and Darwin whose “deliberate cultivation of solitude had significant consequences for the public reception of their scientific work” (Golinski 81). As Jan Golinski argues:

...it was not an asocial act...To represent oneself as withdrawing from society was understood as a means of drawing closer to the realm of abstract truth...And the places to which they withdrew were...made...of the social conventions that validated those sites as appropriate for the production of natural knowledge. (83-84)

In Shonku’s case, this “site” is the small hamlet of Giridih, which was once famous among the Bengali middle-class as a vacationing spot for its natural beauty and fortifying climate. This location, removed from the bustle of the nearest urban center Kolkata, allows him easy

access to local ingredients for his research and detaches him from all the mundane and stressful problems of urban life. He prefers to work in isolation in his impressive personal laboratory and his general attitude towards his own scientific practice is more attuned to the search for mystical, “abstract truth” than worldly acquisition. Echoes of the “materialistic west” versus “spiritual east” argument are implicit here, as is a humanist attitude towards science that constantly questions the moral imperatives of “progress” and “development”.

Both the attitude and the process are immediately distinguishable from contemporary practices of “Big Science” where “research philosophy” is more often than not cleverly phrased marketing/public-relations strategy and where research is conducted in gigantic building complexes involving numerous people in various levels of managerial and research hierarchies. This had become a world-wide trend by the two World Wars and Nehru’s vision¹ for independent India was also largely predicated on state-regulated, massive scientific institutions, which by the 1960’s in India were bogged down incorrigibly by bureaucracy and corruption. In basing Shonku on the anachronistic 19th century scientist-adventurer model of Arthur Conan Doyle’s Professor Challenger and Sukumar Ray’s Hñeshoram Hñushiyar, Ray was perhaps implicitly rejecting the institutionalization of science via state or privately funded research centers where collaboration trumped individual contribution.

Towards the end of the series, however, Shonku frankly acknowledges the marginality of his position, in that his peripheral location and scant infrastructural resources may no longer be

¹ In terms of the legacy of Nehruvian Science, the Shonku series does align itself to some of the same philosophical concepts that inspired Nehru, the craftsman of modern science in India. As David Arnold argues in the essay “Nehruvian Science and Postcolonial India”, “For Nehru, India’s philosophical and spiritual traditions could actively inform and supplement the work of modern science. The ‘culture of science’ gave India pride in its past, but also the intellectual authority and resources to be an active and equal participant in the present-day domain of science”. And Shonku’s scientific activities are very close to these aspirations. Like Nehru, Ray also draws from Vedantic sources, for instance, “the conception that everything, whether sentient or insentient, finds a place in the organic whole”, as Partha Chatterjee has discussed at length in his *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*. For a detailed discussion on Nehruvian Science and Professor Shonku, see U. Mukherjee, “Black Ants and Bones”.

sufficient, or even necessary, in the age of “Big Science”. Despite this admission, he does not change tactics and formally join any research institution, but continues to produce several individually-researched novum-tools in the later stories, while reasserting that the broader network of scientists and institutions have not been miserly in recognizing his individual genius and contribution (“Nakur̥babu and El Dorado”, 1980).

Despite his love of isolation, Shonku does not exist in a social vacuum. His household consists of the aged manservant Pralhad and the cat Newton. Shonku cares deeply about Newton and usually treats Pralhad with a characteristic disdain he reserves for people with inferior intellectual faculties. In keeping with the satirical and comic tone running through the series, their names too have distinct connotations. *Pralhada* means “an excess of joy and enthusiasm” and like the mythical Pralhada from the *Bhagavat Purana*, who is ridiculed and persecuted by his father, King Hiranyakashipu, for his devout faith in Vishnu, Pralhad often becomes the unwitting guineapig for Shonku’s experiments while continuing to be faithful to him². Newton, of course, is named after the scientist and Shonku’s condescension in naming a pet after arguably the most illustrious name in “western science” speaks volumes on his (inflated and fallible) arrogance³. This microcosm is also emblematic of the recurring juxtaposition of “Hindu myth” and “western science” that we encounter here.

The conspicuous absence of any female figure in Shonku’s adult life appears to uphold the view that women are mere distractions in the search for higher knowledge and “abstract truth”. Shonku mentions his mother once and only a handful of minor female characters appear

² See “Narsingh Avatar: Fourth incarnation of Lord Vishnu” <ritsin.com>

³ Since the late colonial times, it was common for Bengali elites to name their pets after British sahibs (a likely response to “Indians and Dogs not allowed” signs, perhaps), and “western” names for pets continue to be popular in Indian households. See “Why do people in India give their dogs English names instead of Indian ones?” <quora.com>

in the diaries. Indeed, Shonku's own achievements as a scientist-inventor have much in common with the romanticized image of the ancient sage of Hindu myth and one of these elements is the superior ontological status of *brahmacharya* or celibacy. The dichotomy between appropriate conduct of the *grihi* (householder) versus appropriate conduct of the *sannyasi* (sage) who has abandoned the household was a charged one in popular Hindu worldview in colonial Bengal owing primarily to the contribution of Swami Vivekananda, and Shonku interestingly maintains a sort of balance between these two modes of existence as well. He is a *grihi* in the sense that he practically maintains a household with multiple members, yet is distanced from the distractions and responsibilities that comes with marriage and domesticity, existing in a sort of limbo true to his name.

Shonku's immediate social circle is dominated by Abinash Majumdar in the earlier stories and Nakuṛ Chandra Biswas in the later ones, both of whom act as foils to Shonku's worldview predicated on scientific rationality. Abinash**babu** is the stereotypical nosy neighbor who likes to drop in uninvited, profess narrow-minded populist sentiments common to the less-enlightened suburban middle-class Bengali and ridicule Shonku's wonderful inventions. Interactions with him are invariably comic in tone and he is described as "superstitious" "lacking curiosity" and "unscientific", though he develops a "taste for adventure" after accompanying Shonku in the search for killer bloodfish-aliens ("*Raktamatsya Rahasya*", 1968) and rescues Shonku from alien plants that suck out knowledge from scientists' brains ("*Swapnadeep*", 1971). Nakuṛ**babu**, on the other hand, acquired an assortment of psychic abilities like clairvoyance and telepathy after being struck by lightning. Most interesting of these is his ability to display realistic visions to others by concentrating on an image in his mind. While initially skeptical, Shonku has no choice but to admire his abilities after they save his life on a few occasions; he

even wishes to exhibit Nakuṛ**babu** as a scientific curiosity to the nay-saying network of international scientists. While these supernatural powers certainly challenge Shonku's (and the reader's) perception of the world as explained by scientific reason, the narrative keeps a loophole open by proposing that science has yet to uncover the mysteries of the human brain.

Shonku's self-imposed isolation and absence of institutional pressure to perform also allows him to uphold certain moral/ethical standards. He has quite the reputation for being a doctor who treats poor patients gratis and recalls being deeply influenced by his father's words that there is no greater joy or achievement than selflessly serving the deprived and the needy (*"Professor Shonku o Khoka"*, 1967, 83; *"Swarnaparnee"* 607). He is not swayed by monetary greed and refuses to be bought off by wealthy foreign antagonists on numerous occasions. He candidly acknowledges support from the local indigenous people and on the main, representations of indigenous peoples in international locations like Egypt, Africa and South America strive to be "politically correct", even going so far as to rationalize cannibalism.

In his dealings with the world-at-large, Shonku is referred to/self-identifies consistently as an "Indian" and operates in a distinctly postcolonial universe very like the one Satyajit Ray himself, as a filmmaker of international renown, was supposedly accustomed to (see Robinson). Irrespective of circumstance, Shonku strives to maintain a gentlemanly demeanor in all his interactions with his international acquaintances, whether they are friendly, hateful or envious—his unapologetic arrogance and occasional pity towards those he considers less than himself in both moral and intellectual capacity is communicated only on reflection, in his diaries. Friendly characters are often deeply respectful towards and knowledgeable of Indian culture and some even use ancient Sanskrit treatises as a basis of their scientific work. More interestingly, even antagonistic characters rarely invoke the colonial legacy to insult him.

One kind of derision that he encounters is based on the “mystical east” stereotype, which, depending on the circumstance, he either negates entirely or uses to his advantage. He dismisses German reporters when they ask him whether all Indians worship cows. When an American tycoon insinuates that Indians use magic, not science, Shonku retorts that if that were the case, Indians would have certainly lifted themselves magically out of poverty. “*Swarnaparee*” (1990), in fact, is the only diary with a direct reference to Shonku belonging to a colonized nation. When Nazi commander Göring racially denigrates him for “two centuries of colonization” and tries to seize the all-disease-curing medicine *miracurool*, Shonku plays the mystical “medicine revealed in a dream” card and warns Göring that if taken by force, *miracurool* will only aggravate his illness. The Nazi commander does not hesitate to buy into this tall claim and the ruse lets Shonku negotiate safe passage out of pre-WWII Germany for Dr. Steiner’s Jewish family, serving, at the very least, as a comment on the pitfalls of blindly believing in stereotypes.

Within the scientific community, while Shonku is generally admired despite his colonial history, a few rare occasions reveal his abiding concern for international esteem and goodwill. In “*Shonku’r Shanir Dasha*” (“Shonku Eclipsed”, 1976), when much-anticipated international invitations are cancelled because he apparently hurled foul accusations at other renowned scientists at conferences he does not remember having visited, he is heartbroken and questions his own sanity—“I’ve never felt so helpless. I’m afraid that I might have to carry the yoke of this hideous infamy and hide in Giridih like a jailbird for the rest of my life” (323). Though his reputation is finally reinstated, his uncharacteristic bewilderedness perhaps also indicates a peculiar postcolonial anxiety in being the only Indian scientist worth his salt within an international network.

This anxiety is more often implicit, though; on the main, he has faith in a network of scientists—“Even though scientists come from different countries, they feel a kind of kinship towards each other. I have been acquainted with Summerton for only three days but it seems like I’ve known him for a long time” (26). He can be a good team player, travelling with other scientists on expeditions and on at least three occasions, helping them with inventions which are also the novum-events of those stories. Anish Deb counts 115 named scientists in the series, though only a few, like his lifelong friends Jeremy Saunders and Wilhelm Krol, are recurring characters (“Shanku’s File”). A polyglot with extensive knowledge of 69 languages, it was his custom to go abroad at least once every year to exchange ideas with fellow scientists, just as his scientist friends visit him in Giridih (322). He is held in high esteem by an international network of scientific institutions, tripping over each other to award him honorary doctorates and provide travel funding for his conferences, seminars and expeditions.

As such, Shonku is a good fictional illustration of the workings of what Roy McLeod calls the “moving metropolis”. The concept of the “moving metropolis” undercuts George Basalla’s west-to-east diffusion model of scientific knowledge, and instead posits an interrelationship of dependence between the colonial “center” and the colonized “periphery” (“Moving Metropolis” 245). After Empire, as the modernist poet Yeats laments, “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold”— London and Paris and Berlin give way to Sydney, Ontario, Kolkata. The “core culture” of imperialism created a “culture in-between cultures”, not only producing “knowledge sites” throughout the world, but also “hybrids and ambivalences which are part of a wider cultural identity” (“Reading Colonial Science” 90). It is no longer necessary for postcolonial scientists to depend on “western” society memberships, publications, university degrees or conferences to establish their professional prowess. More often than not, international

acclaim comes knocking at his door in Giridih. Shonku is equally at home in his laboratory (removed, again, from the nearest “center” Kolkata) and at international workshops with American and European colleagues, producing science which is simultaneously ambiguous and acknowledged by his peer group.

Use of science and the novum

In these diaries, there are two clearly distinct sets of novums, which I characterize as novum-tools and novum-events. The first set consists of Shonku’s own discoveries/inventions and function as helpful tools in his quests. Two recurring examples are the all-disease curing medicine *miracurool* and the infallible *anhillinin* pistol that can instantly vaporize any living organic matter. There are over 70 named inventions and they never rise to the level of the dominant novum in the series, but instead provide the basis of Shonku’s repute as an inventor and scientist.

The second set consists of the dominant novums of the stories, ranging from plausibly science-fictional (aliens, weapons of mass-destruction) to pseudo-scientific/ discredited science (lost worlds, creatures new to established animal taxonomy) to purely fantastic (ghosts, magic). These novum-events, while initially disruptive, are usually resolved by the end of the tale and the aspect of imagination or fictionality becomes much more important than expounding dry scientific principles, or even the plausible scientific bases, of these actants/occurrences. Since the *unscientific* premises in the Shonku stories, such as Lamarckian evolution instead of Darwinian evolution, have been discussed by others, I do not include those here (see “Shonku: A

disenchanted exposition”). Descriptions of sensory affects predominate and the staging of these novum-events are often cinematic in technique.

The Novum-tools

Ray was admittedly influenced by his father Sukumar Ray’s creation, Hñeshoram Hñushiyar, a scientist-explorer, in creating Professor Shonku and also characterized Shonku as a “mild-mannered Professor Challenger”. In both these literary predecessors, we notice that names are metaphorically significant, indicating essential characteristics of the creature/person. Both of them are also very fond of naming their own “discoveries” with outrageous Latinate derivatives. For example, in Sukumar Ray’s satire on the lost world trope, one of the newly discovered creatures is named “chillanosaurus”, a comic bilingual combination of “*chillano*” or “shouting incessantly” (in Bangla) with the suffix “saurus” from the Latinate biological classification system, which behaves exactly as its name suggests. This propensity for introducing a metaphorical element in coining neologies, often with comic overtones, can be discerned in the Shonku stories as well. Shonku regularly invents gadgets and medicines and attributes self-discovered chemicals with “proper” Latinate names like *Tantrum Boropaxinate*, *Paradoxide powder* and *Aqueous Velosilica*. Some other examples are *batika-Indica*, a food pill made from the fruits of the Indian banyan tree that keeps one satiated for 24 hours, “snuff-gun” or a gun that shoots snuff and makes the opponent sneeze for 33 hours, *linguagraph*, that produces Bangla translations of any human or animal language and *omniscopes* which is telescope, microscope and x-ray in one.

As Istvan Csicsery-Ronay argues in *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*, “fictive neologisms” can be of three types and a predominance of the first two types, namely *bound-*

morpheme constructions (“one affix or root that is not itself a word”) and *free-morpheme constructions* (“two or more words combined to form a self-evident compound”) can be clearly discerned in the naming of these novum-tools in the Shonku stories (italics in the original, 24). Csicsery-Ronay further links the dominance of each of these types of neologisms to successive phases in SF history: for instance, that early SF “favoring scientists or intellectuals for its heroes” tended to use bound-morpheme neologisms (for example “*chillanosaurus*” where “*chillano*” is an existing word and “*saurus*” is not) and “as the protagonists increasingly became scientific commoners, so did the prevailing neologisms” (24). While Csicsery-Ronay’s argument that “scientific-technical terms drawn primarily from physics and cult of the inventor reinforced the heroic phase of the individualist scientist-superman, whose ability to manipulate scientific terminology reflects his control over the forces of nature” is largely true for this series, more interesting is the juxtaposition of anachronistic and contemporary elements utilized by the series which is also reflected in the linguistic construction of its neologisms (25).

While Shonku is indeed a scientist-inventor and the series employs many narrative devices common to early SF, its historical context in the later decades of the twentieth century makes it more predisposed to the inclusion of the “scientific commoner” and free-morpheme neologisms like the *snuff-gun* and the *omniscopes*, both of which combine known words to signify a new object. Also, the novum-tools here, unlike in the *Diary of Hñeshoram Hñushiyar* (1922) rarely have bilingual names employing wordplay/pun, somewhat undercutting their satirical impact. Moreover, as I discuss later, Shonku is remarkably un-heroic given that he is the named protagonist of the series, and this too undermines the “cult” of the inventor-scientist eulogized in early SF.

Professor Shonku also routinely uses “non-traditional” (to “western” science) ingredients for his medicines/gadgets like mushrooms, snakeskin, tortoise egg-shells or the juice squeezed from the roots of a particular tree from a particular *samsan* (crematorium). These ingredients⁴ are indispensable for the effectiveness of the gadget/medicine but can only be locally sourced.

Shonku’s father was an Ayurvedic doctor and his grandfather, who visits him as a ghost, was a Tantra practitioner— given this family background, it is not surprising that Shonku too finds innovative uses for local ingredients. Moreover, he rarely discloses the exact formulae of his inventions even to his closest colleagues and friends: “I was astonished by the qualities of my own medicine. But I didn’t reveal to Summerton the ingredients I had used—especially the antennae of a lobster” (“Egyptian Horror” 22). The use of “non-traditional”, locally sourced ingredients in small amounts also removes his inventions from assembly-line production, to which he is quite strongly opposed, echoing both popular sentiment and a version of the social construction of science, according to which science/technology is initially value-neutral but can be used for great harm if placed in the wrong hands. However, even a cursory evaluation shows that many of these inventions are geared towards bettering the human condition; given Shonku’s otherwise humanist attitude, it is surprising that he hoards these fabulous inventions instead of finding ways to disseminate them more widely at little cost. But then again, unlike Edison to whom he constantly compares himself, he is no businessman!

Further, his inventions are extremely economical—his robot Robu, master of Mathematics, Languages and General Knowledge, cost him only “Rs 330, 75 paise, 7 annas” to build, which would be roughly equivalent to \$200 today (“Professor Shonku and Robu” 100; see Inflation Calculator). Reducing costs made Robu cross-eyed but Shonku makes up for the defect by giving

⁴ Some of these lists are reminiscent of the 300 BCE Sanskrit treatise Arthashastra (on warfare and statecraft), for example, “ a powder made from fireflies and the eyes of wild boars that can endow night vision...a lethal smoke by burning snakes, insects and plant seeds” etc (cited in Nanda *Prophets* 73).

it a permanent, lopsided smile. When he presents Robu to the German scientist Professor Palmer prior to an inventor's convention in Heidelberg, Palmer's eyebrows hit the ceiling— "Looks like you put the thing together with glue, nails and duct tape! Are you sure it speaks and works?" (103). In contrast, Shonku's rival in robot technology, Dr. Borghelt, has been bankrupted by the costs of building a perfect but malevolent robot-replica which can't even do math. Here, functionality is prioritized over aesthetics, and time and again, Shonku's staunch attitude is that scientific breakthroughs need not necessarily accrue great financial expense especially in an impoverished, "developing" country like India.

A contemporary example of this frugal attitude would be the vision behind the *Mangalyaan* Mars Orbital Mission launched by the Indian Space Research Organization in 2013, which, costing \$73 million, is the least-expensive of the Mars missions so far and the first to succeed at its first attempt (see "India's Mars mission: worth the cost?" and "India's Mars satellite..."). From another angle, Shonku's attitude towards finances perhaps also rejects a "top-down" research infrastructure model requiring substantial financial investment from interested private parties with their own agendas in favor of an alternative, everyday-popular concept of *jugaad* (frugal innovation) or making do with easily-available, locally-sourced materials. While a common feature of *jugaad*-innovation being "use and throw" is wholly lacking in the painstaking long-term research Shonku performs for each of his inventions is an obvious dissimilarity in process, the emphasis in reducing production costs remains an important similarity (See *Jugaad Innovation*).

Both these characteristics of Shonku's scientific-innovative process however, in juxtaposition with his worldwide acclaim as a scientist, presents a grave incongruity from the perspective of social construction of science— what exactly is he doing at all the international

conferences and while taking out patents, when the exact formulae of his inventions are couched in mystery and the processes are locally dependant and non-repeatable by anyone else? To be a producer of viable scientific knowledge, Professor Shonku *must* be part of a network which validates his scientific activity, but the network itself, within these narratives, cannot do so by any means which are usually available for double-checking fraudulent claims (See Latour). Even if Shonku reserves for himself and a few chosen allies the exclusive use of his gadgets and inventions, (impossibly and) single-handedly converting them to veritable “black boxes” wherein it is not necessary to understand how the thing actually works, the question of his fame still remains. There is of course quite a bit of literary sleight-of-hand involved, where one’s fame is not necessarily proportional to the validity or repeatability of one’s experimental hypotheses or claims. But looking more closely, one can find here the “hybridity and ambivalence” that MacLeod mentions in his discussion on postcolonial science, as well as a germ of Kuhn’s “revolutionary” science which at crucial historical junctures threatens and overturns the paradigm of “normal”, established scientific practice (Golinski 14).

Professor Shonku’s consistent use of “non-traditional” ingredients and processes like frugal innovation indicates a great indebtedness to modes of “indigenous scientific thought of the sort found in...India” but also poses a threat to established scientific practices by its integration within the dominant paradigm of “Big Science” (Basalla 611). It is in fact the efficacy of these “non- traditional” methods and ingredients that put Professor Shonku’s work at a notch higher than his contemporaries and allows him to create such miraculous gadgets and medicines. A consequent implication is that “western” science has already reached a point after which it can produce few contributions of any significance towards the betterment of humanity and thus it is now the turn of the postcolonial scientist to chart new paths. Needless to mention, an implication

like this has great subversive potential and is also extremely empowering for the Bengali middle class reader who has enjoyed, by the time of publication of these stories, a very turbulent Independence of twenty or thirty years.

The Novum-events

Usually the dominant novums, this set covers a wide range from the plausibly scientific (alien encounter, sentient computers and robots) to the pseudo-scientific, ie. propositions already discredited by science (telepathy, life on Mars, previously undiscovered mammals, lost worlds) to the wildly fantastic (the occult, esoteric incantations resurrecting a living creature from its bones, curse of the Egyptian mummy). Novum-events also actively engage with the SF-and-fantasy generic megatext, the “web of interpenetrating semantic and tropic givens or vectors”, drawing on and reworking many images, themes and tropes found therein, while also incorporating mythical, fantastic and pseudo-scientific elements (“SF Megatext”). In reading this series, Carl D. Malmgren’s proposed typology is extremely useful in mapping the thematic loci of the “Alien-Encounter” subset on the “Self/Other” axis respectively (*Worlds Apart* 18).

For instance, each of the five properly “Alien-Encounter” stories featuring six sentient alien species (“Diary of a Space Farer”, “Mystery of the Bloodfish”, “The Mysterious Orb”, “The Messenger from Outer Space” and “Dream-Island”) interrogate moral and intellectual boundaries in interactions between humanity and the non-terrestrial alien other. Four of these six alien species are presumably malevolent towards humans: Shonku escapes from two, aids one and annihilates the last. In “Mysterious Orb”, Shonku pragmatically negotiates the moral dilemma of committing genocide on the miniscule inhabitants of a mysterious, chameleon orb, “the smallest planet of the Solar System” (71). But he soon realizes that the danger of freeing this

virus species capable of killing all life on Earth far outweighs his guilt and sin. Similarly, Shonku's intellectual limitations are challenged by the two benevolent species. His interactions with the giant ant-like genius inhabitants of Tafa at his final destination ("Diary of a Space-Farer") is a satirical take on the idea that humans are the pinnacle of evolution and the depiction of similar aliens in his literary predecessors H.G. Well's *Martians* (*War of the Worlds*, 1897) and Premendra Mitra's giant ants ("*Pñipre Puran*", "Story of the Ants", 1931). In "The Messenger from Outer Space" (1979), a robot emissary (from the benevolent but now-extinct alien species, the true progenitor and ally of mankind), arrives in a pyramid-like spacecraft to alleviate the problems of mankind for the last time (412). Erich von Daniken's Ancient Astronaut theory (*Chariot of the Gods*, 1968) is here reframed in a thrilling tale of ancient Egyptian prophecy, intrigue, scientific rivalry and murder, culminating in Shonku receiving a gem-like stone containing encoded data which he fails to decode despite his best efforts (395-414). In an ironic twist, Shonku wears this diamond-like gem with a blue aura on a ring on the middle finger of his right hand, like an astrological gemstone ring worn by many Hindus for "improve(ing) marriage prospects" (414; "Precious Stones"). The juxtaposition of this superstition (currently fuelled by pseudo-scientific theories of cosmic vibration) with Shonku's blatantly celibate and scientific attitude points again to the self-reflexive satire implicit here as well as the melding of indigenous-mythical and "global" elements.

At this point, Malmgren's seminal essay on Science Fantasy and how it forms a distinctive subset within SF writing is especially pertinent, as the bulk of the Shonku stories clearly fall into that category. Malmgren argues:

Science fantasy, like SF, assumes "an orderly universe with regular and discernible laws", but like fantasy, it contains at least one violation of the laws that we derive from the current state of science...the scientific discourse of

science fantasy serves to validate the counterscientific element, convincing us of its plausibility. (“Towards a Definition of Science Fantasy” 261)

...science fantasy tends to ask basic philosophical questions having to do with the nature of reality itself, and the discourses in which we inscribe reality. (“Against Genre/Theory” 142)

In the Shonku stories, the bulk of the novum-events/dominant novums are validated in this fashion. Placed in the otherwise rational world predicated on “logical consistency, predictability, regularity, accountability (and) comprehensibility”, pseudo-scientific and supernatural elements like ghosts, telepathy, lost worlds etc. accrue an effect of scientific plausibility (“Science Fantasy”, 261). “Contravention of natural law”, in this context, is understood as the state of scientific knowledge in the “real” world. Presumably, readers already know (or have the capacity to learn) the difference between “fact” and “fiction” given the specific example. Within the narratives, this plausibility effect is unmistakably marked in Shonku’s repeated and optimistic assertion that human science has yet to unveil all the mysteries of the universe; that sometimes the creation miraculously exceeds the creator’s expectations (*miracrol*, “Robu”, “Compu”) and that humankind will eventually solve all these mysteries in “next twenty-five, fifty, at most a hundred years” (“Egyptian Horror” 25).

Moreover, these novums relate better not to Suvin’s strict principle of “cognition” but rather to Carl Freedman’s looser conception of “cognition effect” or “the attitude *of the text itself* to the kind of estrangements being performed” or “an illusion of valid knowledge...propped up by convincing, but ultimately merely discursive...legitimizing arguments by authoritative scientific voices” (italics in the original, Freedman 18; *Seven Beauties* 140). Both “deliberate contravention of natural law” and “cognition effect” are, for instance, seen in “Shonku and the Bones”, where a *sadhu-baba* (here, a wandering Tantric practitioner) resurrects dead animals from their bones with an esoteric *mantra*—

I am a scientist. I don't know if there is a scientific explanation for what happened right before my eyes...But what I saw was so unambiguous that it leaves no room for disbelief...[with the chanting]the pile of loose bones instantly clicked into place...flesh, blood, veins, skin, hair, nails, eyes appeared, and finally, life—and with life, the pile of bones, now transformed into an adorable white rabbit, blinked its eyes, shook its long ears and disappeared amidst the crowd. (35)

That animals can be resurrected from bones just with the chanting of esoteric *mantras* is a blatant “contravention of natural law”; that Shonku, a renowned scientist, validates this otherwise “magical” event with empirical proof of having seen a resurrected but perfectly normal rabbit with his own eyes consolidates the “cognition effect”. The battle between Shonku as the voice of reason and science and the *sadhu-baba* representing an indigenous esoteric tradition, as-yet-unexplained by science, questions our epistemological biases. Shonku attempts and fails to record this esoteric chant, earning the wrath of the *sadhu-baba*, who turns malevolent and attempts to kill Shonku by resurrecting a dinosaur from its bones at an archeological site. Unfortunately for the *sadhu-baba*, the dinosaur he resurrects is *not* carnivorous, and instead of attacking Shonku, it targets as its food the tree on which the *sadhu-baba* was sitting. The story is thus resolved in a twist of dramatic irony and poetic justice which, in this instance, consolidates Shonku's moral superiority over the *sadhu-baba*'s murderous intent. As such, formal and discursive elements come together both to strengthen a humanist-moral paradigm and critique established scientific practices that presume to be all-explanatory.

A similar critique is seen in Ray's take on the lost world trope in “The Unicorn Expedition” (1973). On receiving a letter from his friend Jeremy Saunders regarding a recently-deceased acquaintance who “*saw a herd of unicorns*” and “*flew with a two-hundred year old lama*” in Tibet, Shonku brings in the collective weight of Pliny, Aristotle, Mohenjo-Daro clay tablets and the Buddhist yogi Milarepa's biography to speculate whether such things are at all possible in a rational, scientific world (transliterated English in the original, 251-253).

Accompanied by Jeremy Saunders, Wilhelm Krol, Abinashbabu and the smuggler-in-disguise John Markovich/Markham, Shonku then sets out on an expedition to the furthest reaches of Tibet. Battling inclement weather, bandits and unforgiving, literally breathtaking landscapes, the team arrives at a secret *gompha* (lamasery). There, Shonku finds the *Uddayansutram* (*Treatise on Flight* in Sanskrit), which postulates that humans can indeed become weightless and fly by virtue of a chemical reaction between a reagent *ngmung* and the heels of one's feet. Shonku frankly acknowledges that such a scientific treatise is unique in the Buddhist philosophical tradition and the discovery itself implies that these forgotten, esoteric knowledges may have achieved breakthroughs not yet accomplished by modern science. Finding and wearing fur boots imbued with the special reagent, the team finally flies over the towering walls of the lost world, *Dunglung Do*.

The lost world is a fairly important trope in early SF and fantasy. In John Rieder's assessment, these are "an intersection of neo-medieval romances and imperial adventure tales", "inherit(ing) both a tendency toward social satire... (and) colonial domination and acquisition" ("Colonialism and Ideological Fantasy", Higgins 135). By the later decades of the 20th century however, with the wane of discoveries of ancient civilizations and the charting/mapping of the globe nearly complete, authors became less inclined to fabulate on known locations and peoples, and the trope had become anachronistic in SFF (See also Freedman 51). Unlike Professor Challenger's encounters with prehistoric mammals and dinosaurs (colonial acquisition) and also unlike Hñeshoram Hñushiyar's encounters with hybrid creatures described by their attitudes rather than anatomy (social satire), Shonku's *Dunglung Do* is a space of imagination concretized. The flora and fauna enclosed within its towering walls are all mythical, like the Dragon, Gryphon, Roc, Phoenix, Basilisk, Airavata (giant white elephant and Indra's mount), Parijat

flowers, *rakshasas* (cannibalistic demi-gods) and of course, herds of unicorns. Shonku hypothesizes— “If many people from many cultures believe in an imaginary creature over a great length of time, the sheer force of that belief itself may bring it to life” (284-5) ⁵. Moreover, since these imaginary creatures are real only within the boundaries of the lost world, they dissipate when forced outside. Thus, the greedy smuggler Markham loses both a stolen unicorn calf and his life in an attempt to escape from the walled-in lost world. At an extradiegetic level, then, this narrative critiques the imperfect state of our knowledge and also becomes exemplary of “estrangement” or the purely imaginative aspect of fiction over the “cognitive” or scientific aspect.

A Rasa Analysis

In the introduction to *A Rasa Reader* (2016), Sheldon Pollock succinctly identifies our modern “horizon of interpretation” as one where its work of “purification” and its “evil twin colonialism” led to a “rise of scientific rationalism” which devalued non-science, and thus “knowledge, moral, emotional and otherwise, that art offers and aesthetics aims to explain was rendered non-knowledge” (4). The Shonku series in particular and *kalpabigyan* in general, built on the dialectical tension between *gyan* (the master-set of all knowledge) and *bigyan* (scientific knowledge limited to the material world) negotiates the binary that Pollock critiques by re-integrating non-science (or “other” ways of knowing the world) within scientific discourse, and vice versa. While the two millennia-long tradition of *rasa* theorization in Sanskrit is replete with obfuscations, lost sources and major conceptual disagreements between commentators, my

⁵ Note the interesting parallel here to Fleck’s “thought collective” for scientific communities/ systems.

arguments in this section draw more from the two ends of the tradition and foregrounds textual readings over theoretical nuances.

Of the eight rasas enumerated in Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* (early centuries CE) *adbhuta* or the wonderful remains the dominant rasa in these texts. Rather than doubting Shonku's rationality or sanity, the reader is invited to question and wonder at the world itself and its infinite possibilities. Unexpectedly, there is a glaring lack of *vīra* or the heroic rasa as posited by Bharata in Shonku's characterization, but the *vīra-adbhuta* connection, ie. heroic actions of protagonists evoke the feeling of *adbhuta* (wonder) in the onlookers, is surprisingly present. *Hāsya* or the comic figures as a supporting rasa, especially as irony and satire, and *karuṇa* and *bhayānaka* are occasionally explored in their pathetic and horrifying detail. Another interesting aspect is Shonku's response to animals, which shows remarkable affinities with *vātsalya* rasa from the five-point Vaishnava rasa determination.

Adbhuta (Wonderful) Rasa

Adbhuta rasa or the wonderful is manifested in three distinct yet related ways here. Firstly, the emotive responses to the novum-events follow the pattern laid down by Bharata and have a more inclusive scope vis-à-vis Bharata's formulation, including both supernatural and material *vibhāvas* or causes. Bharata's list of examples, including "seeing heavenly beings, gaining one's desired object, (seeing) a flying chariot, a magic show or a juggler's show" etc. could well be extended in a modern context to such SF tropes as UFO's, magic performances, reanimating the dead or controlling evolution etc. (Masson and Patwardhan 1: 56; "Professor Shonku and Chi-Ching", "*Corvus*"). This aspect works to further underscore the centrality of imagination in this verisimilar but alternate world.

The second aesthetic-emotive response concerns the link between the heroic and the wonderful. As the named protagonist, not only does Shonku *not* reveal any of the “heroic” qualities laid down by Bharata (except perhaps “patience” and “courtesy”), such as “correct perception, decisiveness, political wisdom, an army (physical prowess), skill in battle, (physical) might or eminence”, he is, more often than not, in need of rescue by his allies at the denouement of the narrative (Masson and Patwardhan 1: 54). Such examples recur in story after story—Abinashbabu rescues Shonku from the knowledge-sucking plants and the mind-control helmet in the den of gorillas; Summerton foils Goring’s plan to acquire *miracurolo*; the exceptional macaw and crow both sabotage their former masters to save Shonku’s life; Robu destroys the other murderous robot; the resurrected dinosaur attacks the *sadhu-baba* instead of Shonku and so on. Despite Shonku’s heroic ineffectuality, however, the use of his inventions evokes a sustained emotion of wonder in his onlookers, even going so far as to approximate gestures appropriate to the performance of *adbhuta rasa*, like cries of “Oh! Oh! (How wonderful), Bravo! Well Done! trembling and sweating” (Masson and Patwardhan 1: 56). While the novum-tools remain just that, tools, oddly enough they salvage some heroism for Shonku.

The third aspect of *adbhuta* here relates closely to a sort of Romantic sensibility about the world itself and is somewhat independent of specific novum-events or novum-tools. In an interview with *India Today* in 1983, Ray reveals this sensibility succinctly: “This universe, and its incessant music, may not be entirely accidental. Maybe there is a *cosmic design* somewhere which we don’t know...I think some day the human mind will explore all the mysteries of life and creation the way the mysteries of the atom have been explored” (emphasis mine, cited in Robinson 299-300). Shonku’s stated opinion on the state of human knowledge and that

sometimes the creation exceeds the expectations of the creator in mysterious ways, closely echoes this sensibility.

In a *rasa* analysis of Ray's *Apu Trilogy* and *Jalsaghar*, Darius Cooper's links this sensibility to the emotive response of *camatkara*, Abinavagupta's critical concept on the "state of fruition of the *rasa*", a "sense of wonder or surprise at the presence of something which suddenly invades our field of consciousness" (18-19). While *camatkara* may be elicited by any *rasa*, it bears the closest affinity to *adbhuta* and both Apu in *Pather Panchali* (*Song of the Little Road*) and Shonku share the same wide-eyed response to the world leading to the same kind of epiphany. For Apu's "realist" world, it is a *jatra* (folk theatre) performance or the first sight of a train (Cooper 27-29). For Shonku, it is the majesty of nature or scientifically unexplainable phenomena, captured in lush detail, plentiful dialogue and appropriate performative cues, that would likely translate very well to a performative/cinematic medium⁶.

From very different philosophical underpinnings, the concept of the sublime could also be brought to bear on this sensibility. Istvan Csicsery-Ronay's proposed "fifth beauty" of SF, the Science-Fictional Sublime, borrows from Kant and Burke to lay a basis for the dialectical relationship between the sublime and the grotesque in SF texts. He argues—

The dynamic sublime...is a response to the sheer physical presence of powerful phenomena, to the superhuman force manifest in magnificent geological formations, waterfalls, storms; that is, those aspects of nature that cause the ego to feel small in the world...to the moments of Nature making-itself-manifest in human consciousness. (*Seven Beauties* 149)

He links this to Burke's view of the sublime, "the aesthetic simulation of risk, of the sensation of ego- and reason-annihilating encounters with one's sense of mere existence...the

⁶ Satyajit Ray's son Sandip Ray, who has made a lifetime career as a director and producer of films based on his father's work, is planning a cinematic adaptation of "Nokudbabu and El Dorado". See "Satyajit Ray's Prof. Shonku to be adopted for film", Dec 1. 2017. <thehindu.com>

rush of life after being on the brink of losing it” (151). The sublime in the Shonku series relates more closely to this set of notions, with a preponderance of “those aspects of nature that cause the ego to feel small in the world” and there is, especially towards the denouement of the narratives, a clear tension between Nature-as-epiphany and the frisson of personal danger. Csicsery-Ronay further foregrounds “technological sublime” as the appropriate response generated by SF, which is more concerned with the “discourse and social practice of science” rather than nature (155). However, since most of the novum-events here are neither truly “cognitive” nor “technological”, they are subsumed and do not transcend their proper place in the “cosmic design”. For instance, even the most technologically sublime of novum-events here, the sentient computer Compu, utters its “last breath”: “I know what comes after death”—responding to an age-old philosophical question concerned with that very “cosmic design” (*Stories* 126).

Hāsyā (Comic) rasa

In a 1986 interview for the ladies’ periodical *Sananda*, Ray mentions: “When I first began Shonku...there was a tongue-in-cheek attitude in the whole affair. But later gradually he became a serious character” (S. Mandal 99). However, this “serious”-ness does not prevent the comic from being the second most important emotive response in this series, after *adbhuta*.

In the Sanskrit and Bangla literary traditions, *hāsyā* or the comic is the second most explored rasa, after *śṛṅgāra* (the erotic). One of the ten types of plays discussed by Bharata, the *prahasana* (farcical comedy) is concerned almost entirely with wit, satire and parody. Further, the “telling of fantastical tales”, listed as one of the causes of the comic, indicates a fundamental affinity between *adbhuta* and *hāsyā*. In 19th century Bengal, texts like *Hutom Pyñachar Naksha*

(1862) and *Buro Salikher Ghare Rño* (1860) not only fine-tuned concepts like *ranga* (banter), *byanga* (mockery) and *koutuk* (jest), but also channelized the comic mode to respond to the colonial context, critiquing the British colonizer and their intellectual servants alike. While this specific type of response to the colonial past is not highlighted in the Shonku series, traces appear in the representation of stereotypical characters such as the greedy, obese American tycoon or the paranoid, delusional mad-scientist.

Within Anglo-American SF and fantasy, the comic mode has arguably been underexplored. Conceptually, the novum itself rarely elicits a comic response and any comic elements present are a function of the plot, not the world, in SF narratives, where generally the latter distinguishes SF from “realist” fiction. When present in the plot, the comic is usually related to the erotic, for example, as in the TV “space operas” *Farscape* and *Firefly*, surprisingly echoing Bharata’s formulation that “An imitation (*anukrti*) of the erotic is known as the comic.” (Masson and Patwardhan 1:48). As most of Ray’s fiction was for children-and-young-adults, and his immediate readership, ie. the Bengali middle-class was and continues to remain squeamish about sexuality in *kishor sahitya*, there was little scope for exploring the comic in relation to the erotic.

A good many plot-related comic vignettes correspond to Bharata’s formulation that “(t)he comic rasa...arises from such *vibhāvas* as wearing clothes and ornaments that belong to someone else or do not fit (*vikrta*)... and describing faults (*dosodaharana*) (Masson and Patwardhan1: 50). The element of incongruity or “not fitting” must however be innocuous and temporary to elicit a comic response (Patnaik 102). Of the recurring characters, *Abinashbabu* is usually at the receiving end of such observations—the reader is often compelled to laughter while Shonku maintains a demeanor appropriate to “noble characters”, with subdued smiles and suggestive

glances (Masson and Patwardhan 1: 50). “Describing faults” can also lead to irony when faults are trivialized, in situations where the narrator is unaware that he’s the character who’s being laughed at (by the reader) (Patnaik 106-8). In this case, it is Shonku who is the victim; for instance, in “Diary of a Space-farer” he is confident that the huge ant-like aliens from Tafa who have “invited” him there because they are entertained by his “simple thought-processes” are actually not very evolved or superior at all, because he uses his snuff-gun on them and they fail to sneeze (20). Shonku is obviously mistaken in correlating anthropomorphic evolution with intelligence, and the joke is on him. Further, of the various accompanying states or *vyabhicāribhāvas* of the comic rasa, “dissimulation” or pretence/deceit recurs here in the final “twist” that turns events in favor of Shonku and his allies. Many instances that undermine Shonku’s heroism are treated in the comic mode, accompanied by witty repartee from his allies, when antagonist entities are cheated out of their ill-deserved success.

In a few instances, novum-tools also come close to eliciting a response of black humour, linking the comic and the pathetic (*karuṇa*). Shonku’s snuff-gun and nightmare pill, the latter inspired by the *jimbhānastra* from the *Mahabharata*, are two novum-tools that have little apparent scientific appeal but provide much scope for this kind of black humour. Shonku uses the snuff-gun on Pralhad, making him sneeze continuously for 33 hours and replaces Abinashbabu’s saccharine pill with the nightmare pill which had previously turned the left side of his beard white from horrific nightmares. While these actions are uncharacteristically cruel for Shonku, that there are no serious lasting effects mitigates this cruelty and it does not attain such proportions as to transform the emotive response to *karuṇa* or the pathetic.

Similarly, grotesque comedy, or the link between *bībhatsa* and *hāsya*, is also explored in a few instances, most notably at the denouement of “Shonku Exiled” mentioned earlier. When a

most uncanny and grotesque of novum-events, the doppelganger Shonku android, is damaged by a bullet, it sits up in its crate of packing foam and starts reciting the very speech that defamed Shonku. While this final dramatic twist proves Shonku’s innocence, he is disturbed enough by his “demonic twin” to fire *anhillinin* and leave no trace of it (341). With the destruction of the android and Shonku’s fame being reestablished, the grotesque is undermined and the comic, mediated by the wonderful (*anhillinin*) brings the reader to a state of contemplative stasis, arguably achieving the ninth rasa *sānta* or quietude, which, within the rasa framework, should be the goal of any work of art (Patnaik 214).

Vātsalya (Paternal affection) Rasa

In all of Bangla SF (and much Anglo-American, Russian and Japanese SF that I have read), this series shows the most consistent and involved engagement with the “sub-human” “other”. While such engagement has varied expressions, in many instances of Indian and Bangla fiction it is characterized as *vātsalya*, a feeling of parental and protective attitude towards younger persons extending to “sub-human” creatures. This is strikingly present in Shonku’s attitude towards and interactions with animals, birds, plants and even insects— cats, dogs, lizards, gorillas, a royal Bengal tiger, a brontosaurus and even the ghosts of a pterodactyl and a cockroach feature at key narrative junctures. However, I will focus here on specific instances and how they approximate *vātsalya* rasa.

Rupa Goswami, the foremost Viashnava theologian, proposed five Bhakti (devotional) rasas which mark stages in a progression of proximity of the devotee towards the godhead Krishna— *sānta* (peaceful), *dāsyā* (servitude), *sakhya* (love between friends), *vātsalya* (parental love) and *madhura* (erotic love between lovers) (“Transcendental Rasas”). *Vātsalya* figures as

the fourth and penultimate stage in the relationship between the godhead Krishna and his devotees, where the devotee feels an intimate parental affection towards the godhead (Voss Roberts 65). The paradigmatic example of *vātsalya* rasa in Vaishnava poetry is Yashoda, Krishna's adoptive mother, who involuntarily "leak(s) breast milk when she witnesses his mighty deeds" (Voss Roberts 65; *Śrī Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu* Prabhupada transl. "Parenthood"). That *vātsalya* "derives its name from the relationship of a mother cow to its calf (*vatsa*)" is, I argue, not coincidental (Voss Roberts 65). Not only does the etymology underscore a holistic connection with other creatures in the world, but it goes so far as to suggest this instinctive relationship between mother cow and calf as somehow more perfect than when articulated through purely human terms, like erotic love or *madhura*.

The cat Newton, for whom Shonku discovers two novum-tools, the longevity pill and the fish pill, is an exemplary pet and companion. Shonku does not bring home a cat mummy because Newton would not like it, removes the Strange Sphere when Newton acts antsy in its presence and is extremely attentive to Newton's moods when other animals are temporarily introduced to the household. Additionally, the novum-events in three other stories are the extraordinary creatures themselves- Corvus the brilliant crow that can do math and has a sense of humor, a macaw that can understand, remember and speak twenty-eight languages and EA, a monkey-like creature which shows signs of intelligence and can adapt instantly to its surroundings. Shonku dresses up EA (who resembles a "four-year old human child") in colorful shorts and dotes on him like a grandparent. For Corvus the crow he builds the *ornithon* gadget and a special cage that responds to the bird's thoughts. Shonku explicitly mentions that they are like children to him, professes a deep attachment towards them, admits that even he cannot fully understand their feelings and attempts to protect them even at the risk of his own life when all three are taken by

greedy antagonists. Shanku's affection does not go unreciprocated; all three of them help save his life at the final "twist" in each story. Shonku admits that animals and birds get along well with him and reveals a depth of feeling that is lacking in his interactions with humans. While their intelligence and other exceptional abilities certainly intrigue Shanku as a scientist, it is the emotional connection that is repeatedly underscored.

However, identifying the emotion of *vātsalya* does not necessarily make it an evoked rasa perfectly aligned to the traditional structure, precisely because its theological weight is completely lacking in Shonku's modern and secular iteration. In my reading, the chief distinction in a contemporary use of Bharata's eight rasas and the Bhakti rasas for literary analysis is that while both spring from (a multifaceted) Hindu theology, there is nothing specifically religious about, for instance, an axiom proposing that "describing faults" will elicit a comic response. In contrast, given the deeply personal nature of the Bhakti rasas and the centrality of Krishna as godhead in this structure, it is conceptually somewhat problematic to secularize it piecemeal. However, it is possible, as I discuss above, to utilize this category in a secular context by way of approximation and resemblances, emphasizing the personal connection between Shanku and his adopted "children", which evokes a similar feeling in the reader. Given Ray's mastery over rasa aesthetics in film, it would not be too extrapolative to propose that he appropriated these traditional structures of feeling here as well.

Conclusion

Implicit and explicit reference to Hindu myth and indigenous and esoteric practices related to Hinduism (Ayurveda, Tantra) recur here and the use of mythology in general is one of the distinguishing features of this series. Combined with supernatural and pseudo-scientific

elements like curses, ghosts, telepathy, hypnotism and creatures new to established animal taxonomy etc. these stories are arguably better examples of science fantasy than SF proper. Additionally, their linguistic and conceptual lucidity, unambiguous moral framework and exploration of positive/delightful emotive states like *adbhuta* (wonderful) and *hāsya* (comic), have brought this series much appreciation not only within Bengali readership but also (through translations into Hindi and English) to broader national and international circles.

In the next chapter, I analyze the second major scientist-focused kalpabigyan series, which contains elements significantly dissimilar to the Shonku series.

Adventures with Science: The SF Series

CHAPTER III

ADRISH BARDHAN'S PROFESSOR NAT BOLTU CHAKRA SERIES

(late 1960's-2008)

Adrish Bardhan and his contribution to Bangla genre fiction and kalpabigyan

Adrish Bardhan (1932- 2019¹) was possibly the single most prolific contributor to genre fiction in Bangla, encompassing SF, fantasy, horror and weird literature and detective/thriller fiction through over two hundred titles of translations, adaptations and original works. Starting his literary career under the pseudonym Akash Sen², he coined the Bangla term *kalpabigyan* for science fiction in 1962 and edited three SF magazines during the 1960's - 80's: *Aschorjo* (1963-1968) and with Ranen Ghosh, Amitananda Das and Sujit Dhar, *Fantastic* (1975-1976) and *Bismay* (1982-current sporadically), along with the more established *Kishor Gyan-Bigyan* (1981-). He has also translated the complete works of Jules Verne, Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and Professor Challenger, several compendiums on "best of" world SF, suspense and horror, including stories by Arthur C. Clarke and Isaac Asimov, not to mention introducing Edgar Allan Poe and H.P. Lovecraft to the Bengali audience at a time when the latter's works had to be

¹ Bardhan passed away on 21st May 2019.

² It is illegal to be an editor under a pseudonym and Bardhan was interrogated by the police for this infarction. Since Premendra Mitra suggested that Bardhan use a pseudonym, this might well be an instance of camaraderie and harmless leg-pulling among authors!

painstakingly sourced (see interview with Biswadeep De et. al.). He also wrote a number of other serialized characters, most significant among these being the detective Indranath Rudra (for an adult audience).

Bardhan collaborated with Premendra Mitra and Satyajit Ray in creating a niche for genre fiction and kalpabigyan in Bangla, and co-authored the path-breaking radio play *Sobuj Manush (Green Man)* with them and Dilip Raychowdhury, which was later published in *Fantastic* (1981). He credits Ray as a mentor, especially in the creation of the Kolkata SF Cine Club, which brought SF cinema from around the world to the Bengali audience. Though being generally well-respected in the Bengali literary community and having received several literary awards in his long career, Bardhan regrettably has not achieved the iconic status of Ray or Mitra or even Sunil Gangopadhyay, most likely because he avoided mainstream-realist fiction for the most part, and because Bengali critics continue to denigrate genre fiction.

The Nat Boltu Chakra series: Publication Perplexities

Bardhan's Nat Boltu Chakra is possibly the longest-running SF series written by a single author worldwide³. From paratextual⁴ sources including prefaces, interviews and book jackets, it appears that Bardhan started writing the Nat Boltu series sometime during the late 60's and published several stories every year, particularly in *Kishor Bharati*, *Kishor Gyan-Bigyan*, the *pujabarshiki* annuals of Dev Sahitya Kutir, and later, *Shuktara*. The two-volume compendium of the Nat Boltu Chakra series is over 1500 pages long and contains a total of 91 short stories and novellas (Ananda, 2009 and 2013 with reprints). First publication details are available only for about 30 of the individual texts. Bardhan apologizes in the prefaces to both volumes for not

³ While one might point to the more renowned Dr. Who for that distinction, it must be noted that the BBC series was novelized later and the screenplays were written and directed by many contributors, not only Steven Moffat.

⁴ For a "paratextual definition" of SF, see Jerry Maatta's "Commercial Market Arrangement".

keeping track of publication details (due to personal circumstances) and it appears that Ananda Publishers did not undertake archival research either. The earliest dated story in the compendium is from 1972; most of the others are dated between 1990-2008, with a handful in the 70's and 80's, and a few can be tentatively placed from internal reference to other stories or historical events and places. Bardhan also regrets that some stories have been lost altogether⁵. As such, it becomes impossible to construct any sort of narrative continuity within the series as a whole. This, along with a proliferation of different aspects of social critique, tropes from the SF megatext, pseudoscience and “borrowings” from foreign sources, lends the overall series an aspect of imaginative chaos an excess. This perhaps an underlying reason why (along with Bardhan's non-canonical status in mainstream Bangla literature), there isn't currently a single critical essay, in Bangla or English, on this fascinating series (to the best of my knowledge).

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I argue that the scientist Nat Boltu Chakra negotiates both international and national scientific networks, foregrounding his regional Bengali identity (over a national “Indian” identity) and saves the world from crises caused by a mind-boggling variety of aliens, hybrids and mad-scientists by drawing inspiration from mythology, techno-occult and “hard” sciences alike. The narratives demonstrate a keen awareness of language use (often in the mode of nonsensical and comic excess) and gender representation. They also perform what Marilyn Randall calls “postcolonial plagiarism” by appropriating foreign SF narratives in an act of

⁵ For example, I remember a novella in which Nat Boltu braves the subterranean caverns from Rider Haggard's *She* riding a giant robot mecha-style, which I read as a teenager and which has not found a place in the collection.

“reverse colonialism”, not as “transgression” but morally justified “celebration” in displacing the white, hyper-masculine heroes of these narratives with a frail, elderly, genius postcolonial Bengali scientist figure (Buranen et al. 136-7).

This chapter consists of six sections: “The Nat Boltu Chakra storyworld”; “Techno-occult and Mythology”; “Aliens aliens everywhere: Rasa and the science-fictional grotesque”; “Use of Language”; “Representation of Women” and “Postcolonial Plagiarism?”

In the first section, I discuss the unevenness in the Nat Boltu series storyworld. This, I argue, contributes to a greater emphasis on characterizations of the protagonists, the scientist Nat Boltu and his “Watson”, Dinanath, by whose presence the stories are connected in a coherent rubric. The narratives also exhibit a marked bias towards all things Bengali in the context of the dominant Hindi-Hindu nationalism in contemporary India, which is significant vis-à-vis the literary-historical trajectory of dual postcolonial perspectives as outlined in the introduction. They also disrupt narrative expectations by the use of strategies such as the “dear reader” technique and metafictional commentary on SF as a genre, which we do not encounter in any of the other texts considered in this dissertation. Indeed, disruption in itself is a recurrent narrative strategy in this series.

In the second section, “Techno-occult and Mythology”, I discuss how techno-occult and mythology meld to create unique novums and plots in the series. Despite the derogatory attitude towards pseudoscience by contemporary SF writers and critics, I argue that the series played a crucial role in introducing the SF megatext and promoting SF literacy within the Bengali readership by including these elements. Similarly, mythology is deployed to familiarize “foreign” novums while also fostering both literal and metaphorical interpretations.

In the third, short section, “Aliens aliens everywhere: Rasa and the science-fictional grotesque”, I present a *rasa* analysis of what SF author and critic Istvan Csicsery-Ronay has called the “science-fictional grotesque”, close-reading the sequencing of the terrifying, the disgusting and the comic rasas. While Csicsery-Ronay’s argument presents rarefied possible conditions for the “science-fictional grotesque”, my analysis locates and traces the process within which it is achieved, and underscores how the inclusion of supposedly “inimical” rasas can accentuate the effect of wonder and comic.

In the fourth section, “Use of Language”, I explore language itself as a factor for cohesion of the entire uneven storyworld. While specific linguistic formations such as whimsy contribute to comic excess in terms of the “tenth” rasa *udhbhāṭa*, the foregrounding of Bangla as a language points back to the foregrounding of Bengali identity in the series, especially in comparison with the “sources” from which many plots and novums are clearly borrowed.

The fifth section, “Representation of Women”, explores how women characters are represented in this series. In comparison with Mitra’s all-male Ghana-da series and Ray’s nearly-all-male Shonku series in previous chapters, the Nat Boltu series presents a much more inclusive world. Bardhan’s representation of women further corroborates the vision that Bengali women, like Bengali men, are well-poised to accomplish greatness in the world.

The sixth and final section, “Postcolonial Plagiarism?”, I take up the issue of plagiarism, in that many plots and novums in this series are clearly borrowed from British and American sources. Drawing from Marilyn Randall’s work, I argue that Bardhan’s highly selective appropriation of others’ work is a good example of “postcolonial plagiarism” as a “celebration” of Bengali selfhood.

The Nat Boltu Chakra storyworld

Series continuity

Given the unavailability of publication details for a majority of stories, it becomes impossible to construct any sort of narrative continuity over the series as a whole, and this is significant keeping in mind a “web of resemblances” theory of the genre. Ghana-da, Shonku and Nat Boltu series partake, in greater or lesser degree, of generic elements from classic detective fiction, where series continuity is premised on two central axioms: a) that the detective him/herself will not die (or give up their practice) and b) the mystery itself (whether successfully resolved or not) will not cause any fundamental rupture in verisimilitude effect, ie. the fictional world itself will not be significantly altered in terms of historical events, places or scientific facts that mark the “real” world on which the former is based. Looking back at the two previous kalpabigyan series analyzed in chapters I and II, it is clear that series continuity is less important in the Ghana-da series, as the events within the tall-tale are already resolved by the time they are narrated and have not caused any rupture in verisimilitude with the “real” world. But here and in the Shonku series, they open up alternate timelines but do not follow through on them, as if hitting a “reset button” *between* stories.

Series continuity is further complicated by the extreme unevenness of the world in which Nat Boltu and his “Watson”, Dinanath Nath exist. While most stories/novellas begin at Nat Boltu’s residence-cum-basement laboratory in a verisimilar representation of Kolkata, the duo travel across space and time, from the nearby Sunderbans to Siberian caverns to Ayodhya in the mythical era of Rama’s reign to far future Saturn and even the end and beginning of the

universe. Most stories fall into one of two plot-types—events either proceed at breakneck speed, like *Time Car* (1981) and “*Chemical X*” or nothing really happens except for a barrage of information in the form of bantering dialogue, like “*Dantalo*” (“Teethy”, 1999) and “*Manush na Jokkho*” (“Man or Guardian”). However, both types of plot present some sort of crisis that Nat Boltu is usually, but not always, able to resolve. Apocalyptic scenarios like the world being inundated by melting polar ice caps or similar events occur in quite a few stories. At the end of individual stories, the world and the two central characters don’t always return to status quo; ie. the danger is not always averted. The unevenness of the world and series-continuity is directly attributable to the fact that Bardhan rampantly “borrows” plot points and novums from British and American SF, and while he always Bengali-fies settings and characters, questions of plagiarism become unavoidable, but which will be deferred for the moment to the “Postcolonial Plagiarism?” section at end of the chapter.

This ruptured continuity also necessitates that our two central protagonists are thoroughly characterized with specific attributes; without protagonists that the reader can identify with, the series would fail to generate any interest over largely episodic plots. This is true for the Ghana-da and Shonku series as well, and uncommon in the face of the prevalent criticism that in SF the novum is more important than the protagonists, who are one-dimensional and not fully fleshed out (Elliot, J.M. 29; Shaw 131). This is perhaps why there are relatively fewer examples of (literary/written) SF series⁶ after classics like Isaac Asimov’s Robot series and Lucky Starr series (1950’s-60’s). Trilogies also appear to be on the wane today in Anglo-American SF (Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Red Mars* (1992), *Green Mars* (1993), and *Blue Mars* (1996) is a recent

⁶ For example, these two lists of “Best Science Fiction Series” (some of the entries are trilogies) do not have a single entry on contemporary publications; this is a limited data set, but it also indicates that standalone SF stories/novellas have been more successful than serialized SF, at least in the American and broader Anglophone context. See “Best Science Fiction series” and “Top 15 Science Fiction Book Series”.

exception), though the trilogy format has been successful for Indian English SF in the last two decades; for example, Samit Basu's *Gameworld* series (2004-7). Serialization (trilogies or otherwise) seems to work much better for science fantasy and fantasy with their "coming of age" of young protagonists and melodramatic undertones, for instance, in C.S. Lewis's *Narnia* (1950-54) or Anne McCaffrey's *Pern* series (1968-2007). While the *Nat Boltu* series does occasionally rely on melodrama, structurally it tends more towards the detective series, of which there are many in Bangla⁷.

Characterizations: Introducing the protagonists

The relative absence of "coming of age" / bildungsroman-esque character development, is a hallmark of much children-and-young-adult literature, which sometimes intersects with science fantasy and fantasy serializations (eg. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*). This is somewhat less common in serialized detective fiction⁸. Classic detective fiction draws narrative inspiration from the picaresque novel in the episodic plots linked by a handful of recurring characters who preserve continuity; for instance, Holmes, Watson and Inspector Lestrade in Conan Doyle's widely influential series. However, unlike the picaresque, detectives and their assistants are usually not characterized as picaros, ie. lying, thieving, cheating, cynical rascals. Picaros are also "static" characters, who, like Lazaro from *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554), do not show any character development per se (See "Picaresque novel", Encyclopedia Britannica). All the series considered here have this attribute as well; like Shonku and Ghana-da and his four housemates,

⁷ Detective fiction has been the most popular of the various genre fictions in Bangla since late colonial era, with Niharranjan Gupta's Kiriti Roy and Sharadindu Bandhopadhyay's Byomkesh Bakshi (1932-1970). It must also be reiterated that *all* four authors considered here contributed actively to the detective fiction genre and were familiar with those generic conventions as well: Premendra Mitra with Parashar Barma, Mamababu and Mejkorkta; Satyajit Ray with Felu-da; Adrish Bardhan with Indranth Rudra and Shirshendu Mukhopdhyay with Detective Shobor. The last two series contain significant "adult" elements in terms of sex and violence and are not considered within *kishor sahitya*.

⁸ An exception would perhaps be the case of "teen detectives", such as Nancy Drew and The Famous Five, who remain teens, ie. do not illustrate physical, sexual or moral "coming of age", no matter the length of serialization.

Nat Boltu and Dinanath are static characters, and every individual story reinforces their image/attributes by adding details. Like Holmes and Watson, Nat Boltu and Dinanath are also complementary characters, the brain and the brawn, per se.

Nat Boltu Chakra

Nat Boltu Chakra is 80 years old and “tall for a Bengali man” at 5’9”, with “broken, stubbly cheeks, toothless gums, bald head (and) a half-crazy appearance” that “generates immediate laughter” (“*Chemical X*”). Always dressed in stained and disheveled *dhuti-panjabi*, the pre-colonial Bengali attire for men, he is prone to bouts of anger and shouting and well exemplifies the “thorny on the outside, soft on the inside” hero type without being hyper-masculine. Even though he is frail and tires easily, he never fails in courage, often putting his own life on the line. The power of his “world-famous Bengali brain” is unparalleled in the very universe (as attested by various alien life-forms) and world organizations, be they military or scientific, are ever in need of his erratic but superior intellect and pioneering inventions.

There seems to be a conscious effort on Bardhan’s part to contrast Nat Boltu with Ray’s Shonku, published around the same time in the 1970’s to 90’s. An immediate visual contrast is in dress, which by any account is tied to one’s projected identity in the world. From Satyajit Ray’s illustrations⁹ and descriptions, we see Shonku always dressed in “western” attire, usually jacket and trousers, sometimes sporting a lab coat or hat; Ghana-da, on the other hand, favors the humble *kurta-pajama* at home and shirt-trousers-jacket in his tall-tales when he’s travelling the

⁹ Ray is exceptional in that he did his own illustrations for both Shonku and Felu-da series and his other short stories. But generally, illustrations accompanying the text are a standard practice in *kishor sahitya*. Several prominent illustrators have contributed to the Ghana-da stories during the 40 years of their publication; the 3 volume compendium published by Ananda has illustrations by Onkarnath Bhattacharya. The Nat Boltu compendium does not have illustrations, but most of the novellas in Sirshendu Mukhopadhyay’s *adbhuture* series have illustrations by Debashish Deb. For more, see Ghana-da Gallery, which is devoted exclusively to the Ghana-da series illustrations.

world. Both world-renowned scientists, Shonku is the quintessential gentleman, while Nat Boltu is closer to the figure of the unsocial and unpredictable mad-scientist. Shonku is also much more of a global citizen and mingles easily with his international colleagues; Nat Boltu does not attend many scientific conventions or foster collegial relationships—he is too busy saving the world—and his human rivals are other mad-scientists, most often Bengali.

“Writing back to empire” *no longer* seems to be a major plot engagement, or at least not directly as in the Ghana-da stories or even subtly as in the Shonku stories. A rare example of “postcolonial anxiety” of the sort witnessed in the Shonku series occurs in “*Prachin Atonko*” (“Ancient Terror”) when Nat Boltu is unsure that his evaluation of a mysterious series of scientist murders would be accepted as he’s an “Asian”, not an “American” scientist, and he needs to be reassured by a senior officer of the FBI that he is a “World Scientist” (1: 460). Nat Boltu and Dinanath are not denigrated/ considered inferior because of their race or colonial history, and in any case, there are few notable interactions with human foreigners in general over the series, “white” or otherwise.

While Shonku’s scientific activities resonate more with the late 19th-early 20th century model of the isolated genius, the Nat Boltu series appears to be much more mindful of how science and the network of scientific institutions work in the world-at-large today, and in this, too, the series is “realistic”, and displays a blatant regionalism and bias towards all things Bengali. For one, there are the somewhat unfortunate implications of Nehruvian Science Policy in Bengal, as Sukhbeer Singh discusses in “The Political Economy of Nehruvian Science”:

As patron and mentor of Indian science in the post-colonial period, Nehru assembled around himself like-minded scientists like S.S. Bhatnagar, P. C. Mahalanobis, and notably Homi K. Bhabha... Thus, the funding for a particular branch of scientific research depended upon the proximity of the top scientists of that field to the politico-administrative system.

This resulted in the widely-critiqued bureaucratization of national-level scientific research institutions, sidelining, until recently, research conducted in universities and other centers of learning. With the proposed policies of Bengali scientist Meghnad Saha ignored at the center, Bengalis had also been sidelined from most aspects of governance and scientific policy-making at the national level. In addition, there were civil unrests, famines, the “Bangladesh War of Liberation” (*Muktijuddha*) in 1971 and Marxist rule (in opposition to the Congress Party at the center), which further alienated Bengalis from decision-making activities at the national level.

This, in conjunction with the increasing economic and cultural hegemony of the Marwari, Gujarati and (broadly) North Indian communities in Bengal over the last 30 years or so, is also represented verisimilarly in this series. Historically, the Marwaris and Gujaratis, originally from western India, had settled in Bengal in the eighteenth century and soon became the doyens of business and industry, supposedly sidelining the Bengali middle-class from entrepreneurial pursuits and pigeonholing them to desk jobs ever since colonial times¹⁰. This intra-national tension is becoming more apparent today with the rise of the BJP and its brand of “Hindi-Hindu imperialism”, which aims to create a homogenized “Hindu” culture coupled with the supremacy of the Hindi language¹¹.

We see this commentary on this, for instance, in “Dolphin er Daak” (“Call of Dolphins”), Nat Boltu’s research on super-intelligent dolphins is funded by a Marwari business organization, which threatens to cut off support due to poor results—Nat Boltu is “sad” because: “They have the money and the goodwill, but they don’t have any patience...research [like mine] is

¹⁰ One of the largest wholesale markets in Asia and the largest market in Kolkata, Burrabazar, is almost entirely run by Marwari and Gujarati businessmen; since early 2000’s these “non-Bengali” business houses have also invested heavily in Bengali cultural production, most notably popular cinema. While arguably the Bengali diaspora has done quite well for itself, Bengalis in West Bengal perceive themselves as having drawn the short straw, especially in the context of “Hindi-Hindu imperialism” in the current context.

¹¹ For current political analyses, see Garga Chattopadhyay, “A bridge too far: Why imposing Hindi on all threatens more than just India’s diversity” and Premankur Biswas, “Why BJP’s Ram Navami Processions with Swords in Kolkata has divided the city”.

impossible with deadlines” (2: 725). Nat Boltu cannot but accept the sponsorship of the Marwari thinktank and depend on their “goodwill” for his scientific research, underscoring the profit-motive that remains largely unarticulated in Shonku’s scientific practice in his private laboratory. Thus this series comes closest to representing (and foreshadowing) this fraught reality of the Bengali middle class.

Arguably, these intra-national hierarchies are then subverted/ sidelined by Nat Boltu’s engagements with international scientific and military research institutions and a mind-boggling array of aliens and alien worlds. Nat Boltu often collaborates, willingly or not, with the military, private research thinktanks and foreign government organizations like NASA and FBI, often in secret and behind the scenes, on earth, in space, and in far future and past times. In this context, the nearly virulent Bengali bias in this series can well be read as a highly ironic and self-reflexive, and sometimes even pathetic, wish-fulfillment fantasy.

Dinanath

If Nat Boltu is the brain, then Dinanath Nath, his favored companion and the primary first-person narrator of the series, is clearly the brawn. With a 6’ 2” muscular yoga-powered frame comparable to the mythical Ashwatthama¹² and anger like Shiva which once aroused knows no bounds, Dinanath is a very picture of youthful courage and stubbornness. Nat Boltu needs him to be his “hands and feet” and requires his assistance in practically every story (“*Chemical X*”). Dinanath repeatedly describes himself as unintelligent and this not only makes Nat Boltu scold him incessantly but also, and more importantly, creates a space within the

¹² Mythical hero from the *Mahabharata*, who is believed to be immortal. Son of the military chief Drona on the Kaurava side, he is an accomplished warrior and kills the Pandava’s sons in a guerilla attack after the Kurukshetra war. Yudhishthira, who only speaks the truth, had to utter his single falsehood to deceive him.

narratives for a dedicated listener to Nat Boltu's scientific or historical infodumps¹³. The to-and-fro witty repartee between them, much like the dialogues between Ghana-da and his housemates, make Nat Boltu's dry and excessive elucidations more entertaining to the reader.

Dinanath is like a son to Nat Boltu and considers the verbal abuse directed at him as expressions of Nat Boltu's fondness, so much so that in *Time Car* when the latter battles a mind-controlling alien virus, he eagerly anticipates the sweet sound of "donkey", "idiot", "moron" etc. emanating from the venerable scientist's mouth, attesting to Nat Boltu's control over his own brain. To top it off, Dinanath is a self-described glutton: in "*Kankra*" ("Crab"), when crab-shaped aliens from the Oort Cloud are set to invade earth, Nat Boltu makes Dinanath buy all the locally available crabs and make an overnight spectacle of cooking and eating them in full view of the alien spaceships, scaring the aliens off by filling his stomach.

Dinanath has all the expected heroic qualities, and embodies the other part of the Bengali wish-fulfillment fantasy, that of a physically strong and brave youth¹⁴, much more youthful and active than Ghana-da. Dinanath's characterization borrows much from Shankar the Bengali adventurer in Africa from Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay's *Chander Pahar (Moon Mountain, 1937)* and Swami Vivekananda's (1863-1902) vision for strong and passionate Bengali youth liberating Mother India from the clutches of the British (see "Education in the

¹³ The "infodump" may be defined as:

[C]ommonly used to designate chunks of technical discourse inserted into fictional texts...on non-fantasized understandings of Technology and science... simultaneously integrated into but distinct from the SF Megatext. [In hard sf, it] should not...promulgate Imaginary Science or previously discredited Scientific Errors. [But] there is of course no such thing as a value-free literary device, a truism all the more pointed when the central function of the literary device in question is information retrieval. This is not simply because it is the winners who write history; it is in fact central to Information Theory that *Homo sapiens* cannot separate "pure" information from the shape information takes in order that we may perceive it. In this light, a condensed information-conveying device like the infodump is almost always conspicuously marked by signs of advocacy, and the hard sf assumption that its contents are value-neutral can be seen as contrarian." ("Infodump")

¹⁴ As discussed in previous chapters, this picture of robust Bengali youth is quite at odds with the sickly, diminutive, over-intellectual, licentious and cowardly image of Bengali men, both in real life and representations in mainstream and popular culture.

Vision of Swami Vivekananda” <esamskriti.com>). While the anti-colonial overtones of Shankar and Vivekananda’s vision are less immediately relevant in the late 20th-early 21st century, Dinanath shares with them his rigorous practice of celibacy. His relationships with the women assistants who accompany them in half-a-dozen stories is more akin to sibling rivalry and vying for Nat Boltu’s attention, as I discuss more fully in the section “Representation of Women”. The only female character that Dinanath gets somewhat attached to, dies in a fire saving children at an orphanage (“*Aschorjo Songbadpotro*”; “Strange Newspaper”). While sharing many attributes with the typical Anglo-American adventure-SF hero, a nearly total disinterest in romantic or sexual liaisons sets Dinanath apart from them and makes this series “child-friendly” as well, as evidenced in the numerous addresses to “young readers”.

Narrative strategies

Most of the stories in the series are in the first person, with some sections of narration in the third-person. Dinanath is the primary narrator, while Nat Boltu also presents epistolary first person accounts in a few stories. In about twenty stories, there are secondary narrators who present parts of the plot to Dinanath and Nat Boltu, whether directly or through written accounts like ledgers and diaries. Most notable of these is Chanakya Chakladar, a teller of tall-tales and the only other recurrent character in the series, appearing in six stories. Some stories start off in the first person by non-recurring but named characters, a sure indication that much of the plot has been “borrowed” from other sources, as these allow the major plot trajectory and consequences to unfold without inserting Nat Boltu and Dinanath in actions atypical to their characterizations or worse yet, having them die if the “source” story demands it. Also, data: I checked a lot of these examples for borrowings and it’s something Bardhan does repeatedly.

These other characters finally reveal some connection with Dinanath or Nat Boltu, whom they approach for assistance at the peak of the crisis. Thereafter, Dinanath takes over the narration, again in the first person, as Nat Boltu steps in to solve the crisis.

“Dear reader”

A dated literary technique and one infrequent in SF, the “dear reader” mode was employed by early British novelists like George Eliot, William Makepeace Thackeray and Charlotte Bronte (among others) to generate sympathies for characters or even include them in collaboration as “conscripted” readers (“Afterword”, Stewart). As novelistic conventions changed, such invocations defending the credibility or truth-value of the fiction became unnecessary, and readers became more comfortable with the realist illusion of a self-contained fictional world that does not rupture and directly intrude into our own. To the contemporary reader, the effect of that invocation is similar to a character in a Hollywood film directly looking at and speaking to the camera— it destroys the illusion of the fourth wall, a self-contained fictional world (see Brown, “Preface” and “Introduction”)

The frequent and direct addresses to the reader all the more jarring and unexpected in this series, as they usually hinge on the claim that the stories are not “marijuana dreams” or fabrications or copied from foreign works: for instance, Dinanath challenges naysayers to identify the “fishy stink of stories stolen from English”, all the while rampantly “borrowing” from those very same sources (1: 790). For example, Dinanath justifies his truth-claim thus:

Lies beget more lies. My fantastic story will seem fabricated only because it has no resemblances to our earthly life in the 20th century. But I am helpless. This account is set in 5321 AD on the satellite Titan. An extra-terrestrial narrative is bound to be unearthly. Besides, if I were to lie, I’m pretty sure that *jomduts* [death-God Yama’s minions] will fry me in hot oil in *jomalay* [Yama’s abode]. Let my imaginative young friends note that

fear of that horrifying eternal punishment, if nothing else, stops me from lying. (*Time Car*, 1981, 2: 374)¹⁵

This sort of direct appeal ruptures the verisimilitude effect; we know the events described are not true, but are asked to believe that they are. This is somewhat unexpected, given that the framing device has been archaic in Bangla mainstream literary fiction since at least the 1920's. The (adult) Bengali middle-class reader has been exposed to all the prominent literary styles from the "west" since the early 1900's, including realist, modernist and postmodernist iterations in Bangla fiction itself. But an argument for the retention of the "dear reader" device can be made if we take into account the relative novelty and marginality of speculative fiction (SF, fantasy, horror, weird) within Bangla literature. Further, the world of the Nat Boltu series teems with unbelievable events and creatures in dizzying diversity and plentitude. Points of verisimilitude with "our earthly life in the 20th century" or even in the 21st century, for that matter, are fragile and dispersed at a moment's notice. This is perhaps an additional underlying rationale behind Bardhan's use of the "dear reader" technique: to provide the reader with a semblance of familiarity and identification with a protagonist who while enmeshed in these extraordinary events, does not forget his own "earthly" origins.

Metafictional reflections on SF as a genre

Dinanath, the primary first-person narrator of the series, is himself is a proud contributor to SF magazines, and has earned quite a fan-following by penning Nat Boltu's adventures. In one story, (fictional) Bengali author Bankubilash Baag even wins the Nobel Prize for his SF novels!

¹⁵ The seamless melding of an unfamiliar far-future extraterrestrial setting with a familiar, purely mythological reference point (which also, incidentally, delimits a horizon of morality ie. telling lies is immoral) functions as a grounding device in this series, and is discussed more fully in the "Mythology" section.

On the juxtaposition of science and fiction in SF narratives, when Dinanath is asked what a “vortex” is and doesn’t know the answer, he muses:

We who write science fiction do so without knowing. That’s why Bangla science fiction has remained inconsequential—hasn’t risen in caste [ie. has yet to come into its own]. Some people are taking this opportunity to stuff science into science fiction and throw out fiction by the scruff of its neck. As a result, science fiction is becoming neither science nor fiction—it’s a weird mishmash. (2: 367)

These elements set the stage for another interesting and uncommon narrative angle, the frequent discussion on SF as a genre and its literary history. Mitra’s *Ghana-da* is mentioned, as are several prominent American and British SF writers popular before the 1970’s, and the achievements of “Golden Age” US magazines in particular¹⁶. These details are almost casually mentioned and the social purpose of SF is abundantly clear from Bardhan’s prefaces and through Dinanath or Nat Boltu as mouthpieces—to instigate a curiosity for the unknown, as “what is unbelievable today becomes believable tomorrow; the unknown today, tomorrow’s knowledge”; “what was fantasy yesterday is science fiction today and pure science tomorrow” (2: 333, 2: 344). Bardhan himself says as much in an interview, and his proposed solution is “30% science and 70% fiction”¹⁷ as the suitable proportion, echoed by other contemporary SF writers like Anish Deb and Ranen Ghosh (see interviews with De et al., *Kalpabiswa*). This vision certainly resonates with the “classic” SF of Asimov and Clarke.

While these discussions of SF as a genre are not exceptionally critical, they do offer a perspective shared by major *kalpabigyan* writers of the 1960’s-90’s. For instance, Dinanath explains: “This story is not for readers of scientific treatises but for *kalpabigyan* connoisseurs

¹⁶ Even though Bardhan continued to write this series at least till 2008, he seems resistant to newer material—for instance, no feminist or “soft-SF” authors are mentioned or “borrowed” from, and neither are subgenres like cyberpunk.

¹⁷ In my reading, the proportion in the Nat Boltu series is closer to 30% science, 40% techno-occult and mythology and 30% SF novums. According to Hugo Gernsback, “The ideal proportion of a scientifiction story [SF] should be 75 percent literature interwoven with 25 percent science” (cited in Landon, 51).

[*rasik(a)*]. . . Just as ghost stories are not for ghosts, science fiction is not for scientists” (2: 460). Even though the word *rasik(a)*, or “one who is capable of relishing *rasa*”, is used casually here, the recurrence of the words *rasik(a)* and *rasa* throughout the series indicates an association between the new genre and the old body of criticism and attempts to carve out a space for a specific kind of reader of the former within the ambit of the latter. Bardhan, Anish Deb and Ranen Ghosh, among others, also stress the importance of SF literacy achieved by reading both foreign SF and scientific material, without which their writing would be subpar, and as their work with the SF magazines show, were dedicated to advance SF-literacy among Bangla readers. Read from this perspective, discussions of SF as a genre and its literary history appear to serve that same educational purpose.

Techno-occult and Mythology

As mentioned earlier, the storyworld in this series is highly uneven across individual stories. Diverse tropes are explored: the lost worlds of Atlantis and Lemuria; the conjecture that gods were actually aliens and humankind is their lab experiment; that plants are sentient and can communicate between themselves; that flying saucers are here; that Venus, once a comet, is responsible for cyclical and catastrophic destruction on Earth; there exist extrasensory powers and supernatural abilities that are just beyond the grasp of science and so on. These “pseudo” or “parascientific” tenets are seamlessly combined with theories from “hard science”, especially physics and biology, along with other tropes common to the SF megatext like AI’s, cyborgs and androids. In this is added a healthy dose of all conceivable sorts of aliens and mythological

references and snippets, mostly from the Sanskritic tradition. This seemingly unconnected combination of unexpected elements over the series may be jarring to SF scholars and readers alike. While the editors of the Science Fiction Encyclopedia (online) admit that the link between SF and pseudoscience is “close and rather embarrassing”, the narratives here are utterly unapologetic, reveling in precisely that sort of connection (“Pseudoscience”).

The Techno-Occult¹⁸

The “pseudo” or “parascience” component and novums derived from them in this series actually conforms to a cluster of ideas that can be called, following David Morris, the Techno-Occult: “the espousal of a fabulous technology and the rendering of the esoteric as a technical artifact” (13). Techno-Occult draws chiefly from the Romantic Occultism propounded by the 19th century Russian esoteric philosopher Madame Blavatsky’s doctrine Theosophy, which was extremely popular for a time in India and USA. Other major and later variants of Techno-Occult include Immanuel Velikovsky’s Incipient Catastrophism and Current and Ancient Extra-terrestrialism, the latter attributable to the great popularity of Swiss author Erich Von Daniken’s Ancient Astronaut Theory, which proposed that gods are actually aliens and that life on earth is an alien experiment. In fact, this series does a commendable job of presenting the core concepts and examples of the Techno-Occult to the Bengali reader¹⁹. In this section, I analyze how

¹⁸ All references to Blavatsky, Velikovsky and Current and Ancient Extra-terrestrialism from David Morris, *The masks of Lucifer: Technology and the Occult in twentieth-century popular literature*, 1992, unless otherwise mentioned.

¹⁹ Belief in the occult and conspiracy theories usually go hand-in-hand in public perception at least in the USA, to the best of my knowledge, so I’m afraid that my reader will link up these two, even though conspiracy theories are not there in this series. Most occult is considered pseudoscience, but not all conspiracy theories are so, even though they may mythologize scientific elements. This series is characterized also by what it excludes: major variants of conspiracy theories, like Hollow or Flat earth theories or the NASA moon landing hoax or the Illuminati and the New World Order or the Reptilian Elite theory are entirely excluded. These various strains of conspiracy theories are usually dismissed by critical thinkers and consequently it’s difficult to find scholarly articles on them. I’ve

concepts proposed by Madame Blavatsky and Erich Von Daniken are appropriated in the Nat Boltu series.

Madame Blavatsky and her tome *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) are cited in at least 20 stories. The Theosophical doctrine is far too complex for a detailed discussion here, and in any case this series utilizes only some of her proposed axioms²⁰. The theosophical *magnum opus* in this series is undoubtedly the novella *Doctor Fuun*, which from both narrative structure and plot seems to be a wholly “original” work. The plot, somewhat meandering and overburdened with numerous sections of infodump, however provides a cohesive philosophical-ideological backdrop within which the novums are situated. A mystery-solving adventure at its core, the novella begins with Dinanath, his brother-in-law Tridib, nephew Robin and an amateur occultist neighbor Lalubabu, investigate a supernaturally powerful and irascible *sadhu* (mendicant) in a town near the Mama-Bhagne hillocks in Birbhum in north-east West Bengal. This *sadhu*, locally called Khakirambaba, keeps flying snakes as pets, makes granite boulders float on full-moon nights and cures paralysis by rubbing the patient with a stone. Charlatan “god-men” claiming supernatural powers of healing and prophesy continue to be a scourge on rural India and have been the butt of satire in many works of Bangla fiction, so this initial reference is clear to the Bengali reader. Dinanath and his team are assisted by Dulichand, a reincarnated psychic

watched a few of them for this chapter, and most of them draw their justifications from Blavatsky and Daniken. Other “pseudoscientific” theories, like homeopathy or astrology, are mentioned and dismissed outright in this series.

²⁰ Most recurrent Theosophical axioms utilized by the Nat Boltu series are: a) the universe itself is composed of animate “cosmic dust” with the potentiality of self-consciousness; b) each soul is intimately connected to an “Universal Oversoul” or “Supreme Spirit” which does not act directly on the universe; c) Fohat, the energy aspect of the “Supreme Spirit” variously called “vital force”, “primordial light” “*daiviprakriti*” (“real nature of god”) and “cosmic electricity” that “links spirit and matter” ; d) the existence of Ages and “root-races”, each “progress(ing) into greater corporeality and higher consciousness” with successive rebirths, like the hermaphrodites of Lemuria (third age) and giants of Atlantis (fourth age), who were destroyed because of pride, sin and “karmic disturbance”. The related theories of “mesmerism/ animal magnetism”, “kirilian auras”, “astral bodies”, “ley lines” and discussions on the “*ashta siddhis*” or eight supernatural yogic powers also recur over the series. Other aspects of the doctrine that are infrequently mentioned by characters other than Nat Boltu and Dinanath are reincarnation, refutation of Darwinism and justifications for racism and imperialism.

searching for the philosopher's stone; he can manifest an astral body, dissolve and recombine any substance and display his kirilian aura, along with visions of the past. The "yellow journalist" Kanu Kormokar, psychic Shampi Thakur and climate-controller "PK Man" Fred Owen also tag along.

Of course, in the climactic twist, it is revealed that Khakirambaba is actually Nat Boltu in disguise, experimenting to harness "earth magnetism" or "Odic force" particularly potent at that particular ley-line conjunction to extract "vital essence" from minerals and cure ailments by stimulating the pineal gland, genetically mutate lower animals to super intelligence and create superior prosthetics. In the end, Dulichand and Shampi Thakur are revealed to be power-hungry criminals, the latter an escaped alien, to boot, and the chief rival Dr. Fuun's plans to genetically modify crocodile babies to dragons and conquer the world are obviously foiled by Nat Boltu.

By providing scientific-sounding explanations, this plot twist not only debunks what was previously perceived as "magic" by the locals, but also supernatural powers of phony "god-men". First sightings by local indigenous peoples like the Santhal *adivasis* are usually deployed and explained differently in the context of a techno-scientifically underdeveloped country as "superstitions" and "ghosts"; these indigenous groups are by no means the "average joe" ie. the postcolonial Bengali middle-class scientific-minded subject, and their interpretations are suspect. By indirectly linking the purely occult explanation given by the *adivasis* to the extraordinary deeds of the rational scientist Nat Boltu (and in other cases, technological advancements of aliens), the stories here present a new way of reading the Techno-occult.

Erich von Daniken's Ancient Extra-terrestrialism also recurs in the series. Daniken proposes that aliens visited the earth in ancient times, "seeded" the planet to produce the intellectually superior human species, created ancient monuments like the Egyptian pyramids or

the Easter Island statues and were generally perceived as gods by ancient humans all over the world. While Daniken's oeuvre paid little attention to Current Extra-terrestrialism or the flying saucer/UFO phenomenon, the two exist in happy conjunction in this series (Morris 135). For instance, in "*Pushpak Rather Deshe*" ("In the Land of [The Mythical Chariot] *Puspak Rath*"), Nat Boltu meets a gorgeous black alien woman and is invited to a tour of the solar system on her flying saucer. She explains how a root-race from the Pleiades procreated with proto-humans and created both ancient Mayans and her race (with webbed hands and feet) and from whom current humans have descended (Daniken's miscegenation theory, Morris 142). The human experiment is a failure, and the "master-race" will soon return to destroy earth. The Nat Boltu series however take a more conservative approach when it comes to the blind progress of technology exalted by Daniken, which leaves no room for environmental or social concerns. Like Ghana-da and Shonku, Nat Boltu is a humanist to the core, and no matter how advanced alien or human technology was or will be, his first impulse is always to save as many humans and conserve the environment as much as possible.

All these "pseudo" and "parascientific" theories, Morris argues, served to deal with certain social anxieties in their contemporary cultural contexts. In the late 19th century, Blavatsky's cosmology provided a new faith for a new elite hierarchy, who were spiritually determined through the imported concept of karma, allowing the individual some degree of flexibility and advancement while still relegating the working classes or "lower" races to a "lumpen spirituality, to be helped, shaped and guarded by the soul elites" (Morris 34). Theosophy also presented a unique synthesis of Christian doctrine and science, especially addressing the anxiety produced by Darwin's theory of the common ancestry of apes and man, by relegating them to mere features of a spiritual cosmology, which, with its 18,000,000-year

span, could easily accommodate evolution (39). With colonization and proliferation of technology in the twentieth century, however, some of these ideas became dated and Romantic Occultism, reinvented through new associations with technology as the Techno-occult, captured the popular imagination in the USA. In other words, “for the Theosophist the spirit is a spirit: in the code of Techno-occultism a spirit is an astronaut misinterpreted by ignorant and superstitious primitives” (120).

Morris reads Velikovsky’s catastrophism as a metaphor for Cold War anxieties—the bomb and threat of Soviet infiltration into American affairs, which could happen suddenly and without warning, just as the cataclysmic events that destroyed civilizations of old. Flying saucer advocacy, with its numerous cults, moved away from these Cold War anxieties to the global threat of more advanced thermonuclear weapons and the space race: all of humanity must now be united against the government-military conspiracy to prevent the “average citizen” from learning about the saucers and their purpose. Then, between 1957 and 1967, “America’s public perception of rocket technology switched from traumatic pessimism to unguarded optimism” (164). Turning its back literally and metaphorically on a world racked with upheaval and self-doubt, the NASA programme’s perception of control, conquest and dominion over the enduring certainties of alien space and future time was emancipatory to the popular imagination (164-5). NASA’s hegemony over space technology and Daniken’s oeuvre came to a symbiotic relationship: for Daniken, “the future is for man to succeed to the ‘brotherhood of the stars’ through unfettered technological advance” and for “the NASA moon programme is to be but the first step towards securing that future” (159, 165).

This brings us to the question of context: social anxieties which plagued America and Europe as technologically developed pioneers of the modern world were hardly as relevant in a

technologically developing postcolonial nation like India, and especially in the context of Bengal, which had been marginalized by Nehruvian science policy since Independence. From the previous discussion of the Nat Boltu examples, it is clear that Bardhan selectively appropriates ideas from a much larger set of these “pseudo” and “parascientific” theories, and what he includes must have resonated in some way (beyond the sheer novelty of imaginative story elements) with his contemporary SF authors and the Bengali reading public for the series to remain in print for as long as it did. One impetus certainly came from Daniken’s *Chariots of the Gods* (1968) being translated into Bangla in the 1971 by Ajit Dutta, and another from his Kolkata visit in August 1975, which created quite a flurry within the scientific and science-fiction community (See N. Singha, *Are the gods of Ramayana-Mahabharata actually aliens?*)²¹.

In my reading, Bardhan’s most-frequently used tactic to naturalize these “foreign” elements is by introducing local settings and actors in addition to the protagonists, achieving a fusion of the local and global— for instance, by reworking the local perception of flying saucers as ghosts, because ghosts are already integrated in that worldview while extraterrestrials are not. Once the “foreign” elements have been grounded, the story can then go “up, up and away”.

Mythology

The other and more striking strategy to ground “foreign” elements is the use of myth, usually from the Sanskrit tradition. Romantic Occultism and Techno-Occult share a deep concern with mythology and the literal reading of myth, specifically the Judeo-Christian myth of Lucifer who is reinvented and projected as a progressive force for human salvation in Blavatsky’s work and transformed to the vision of the ancient astronauts in Daniken’s oeuvre (Morris 39, 142). Unsurprisingly perhaps, Luciferianism goes almost entirely unmentioned in

²¹ Anecdotal evidence on social media on the scientist Stephen Hawking’s obituary suggest that in the 1980’s and 90’s, Marxist intellectuals were devouring *A Brief History of Time* (1988) and *Chariots of the Gods* (1968) with equal enthusiasm.

this series. Instead, it focuses on the other part of Blavatsky's material: Blavatsky herself was deeply inspired by Hindu and Buddhist philosophies and claimed to have received *The Secret Doctrine* from the "Hidden Masters" of Shangri-La or Shamballah, the "lost-world" containing the secret knowledge of all Ages. Sanskrit terminology like "*prana*" and concepts derived from Hinduism and Buddhism, like karma and reincarnation, while exotic for the "western" audience in the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, are presumably not as exotic for the late-20th century postcolonial Bengali audience, providing another point of familiarity or resonance.

Mythology is employed in three (and possibly four) related ways in these narratives. First and most simply, mythological snippets act as a familiarizing device, as seen from the *jomdut* example mentioned earlier or in *Time Car*, where Nat Boltu visits the *rakshasa*-infested Dandaka forest during Rama's rule to source an ingredient essential for modifications to the time machine as deforestation has made that plant extinct in our present time. In these instances, scientific theories, pseudoscientific/debunked theories and mythology are seamlessly combined to rationalize a novum immediately recognizable from the SF megatext. This is one of the unifying patterns in this series: while the lay reader, especially the young reader, might find it difficult to distinguish pseudoscience from science, mythological references like the existence of *rakshasas* (cannibalistic demi-gods) in a forest during Rama's time are likely to be more commonplace knowledge than for instance, the scientific proposition that crocodiles and dinosaurs do not have sex chromosomes.

Secondly, the use of mythological concepts facilitates a metaphorical interpretation of the otherwise purely technological artifact or being. For instance, in "*Manush na Jokkho*", the interlocutor is a cyborg, who was originally human (the historical figure Nikolai Mikhailovich Amosov) but has replaced his entire organic brain and body several times with advanced

technology. By pairing “cyborg” with the pre-colonial folk-supernatural concept of “*jokkho*”, someone who selfishly hoards treasure (here knowledge)²², metaphorical attributes are transferred, which “humanizes” the technological artifact or being and in this particular instance also proves the universal efficacy of sycophancy, as Nat Boltu is able to deflect the cyborg’s plans of becoming famous in this “Age of Publicity” with his sweet and pleasing speech.

The third type of use is more problematic, arising from tensions between Blavatsky’s selective appropriation of “eastern” doctrines and Bardhan’s selective appropriation of Blavatsky’s doctrine, in conjunction with the drastic change in worldview resulting from 200 years of colonization. As Nat Boltu often chastises Dinanath: “You’ve become such a smartass after reading two pages of English; you don’t respect the Puranas”. This sort of rebuke is as old as the beginnings of Indian-Hindu nationalism in the 19th century, and its continued relevance in the late 20th century perhaps stems from the simultaneous appropriation of Hindu doctrines like yoga and ayurveda by the “west” while the “rightful inheritors” of these ancient knowledges neglect them or have forgotten them altogether. Snide references to “*paschatye dakini-tantra*” or “witchcraft in the west”, ie. the New Age movement, abound in the series—the implication is that the “west” has now lost its scientific path/supremacy to pseudoscience and only the postcolonial scientist, by reinventing ancient knowledges, can show the path forward.

Integral to this formulation is a literal interpretation of myth. For instance, in “*Pushpak Rather Deshe*”, Nat Boltu makes the convoluted argument that since SF is only appropriate in the modern age, descriptions of weapons and transportation from ancient scriptures *could only have*

²² In Bangla folklore, a *jokkho* or *jokh* (possibly from the Sanskrit *yaksha*) is one type of ghost, arising from the belief that male Brahmin adolescents were buried alive with treasure so that the spirit would doggedly guard it for all eternity and kill anyone who tried to loot it. The *jokkho* would only be released from his eternal servitude if a descendent or someone of the same bloodline as the original owner of the treasure came to claim it. Hemendra Kumar Ray, one of the early contributors to kalpabigyan, wrote a couple of horror novels around the idea, *Jokher Dhon* (*Jokkho’s Treasure*, 1930) and *Abar Jokher Dhon* (*Jokkho’s Treasure Revisited*, 1933). For other types of ghosts in Bangla folklore, see “Ghosts in Bengali culture”.

been fact, ie., science, not fiction. He cites ancient Tibetan texts *Tantua* and *Kantua* (possibly fictional), along with *Samarangana Sutradhara* (10th century AD compendium on Vastu Sastra, architecture), to speculate how the mythical “fiery” Pushpak Rath, given as a boon from Brahma to Kubera (the god of wealth), later taken by Ravana to kidnap Sita, could only be an intergalactic spacecraft/rocket or how the “brahmastra” given to Aswathama by his father Dronacharya, which when deployed in the Kurukshetra war blossomed a cataclysmic inferno, could only be the atom bomb and so on. While Hindu-nationalist, Vedic-science apologists argue these to be factual truths, Nat Boltu however poses them as bewildering speculations. This allows the narrative to somewhat sidestep the justified allegation as to why, if these ancient weapons were so advanced, do they correlate exactly with twentieth century technology (see also *Nanda Prophets*).

Another recurrent trope common to apologists of Vedic science is the dating of *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*. It is generally accepted that these epics describe historical events embellished with poetic imagination, but Vedic apologists tend towards interpreting all of it as fact, positing myth as history (Nanda, “Introduction”, *Prophets*). Several scholars have studied astronomical references in these two and related texts and generated dates in conjunction with sophisticated star-charting computer programs, though their proposed dates vary. In the first section of *Time Car*, Nat Boltu cites P.V. Vartak, one such scholar, who dated the Kurukshetra War to 5561 BCE, nearly two thousand years prior to the date proposed by later scholars. Nat Boltu actually witnessing events like Rama’s birth or Dasaratha’s death on the exact dates specified by Vartak, especially as these dates have been debunked, is problematic precisely because it engenders thorny associations within the contemporary cultural context of Hindu nationalism and Vedic science. While the SF reader has no problems in envisioning far more

bizarre events in alien-space future-time, Nat Boltu's truth-claim of witnessing of myth as history gives us pause, as alien-space future-time is empty of cultural significance in ways which the age of the *Ramayana* is not. Ghana-da and Shonku never present us with this sort of conundrum; the Nat Boltu stories, on the other hand, force the Bengali reader out of their cocoon of familiarity to confront, imaginatively, the past, present and future, here and elsewhere.

Finally, the use of mythology in this series may serve a possible fourth function, that of expanding children's knowledge of these mythologies in the first place. For instance, the concept of *naraka* or "Hindu hell" is a culturally oft-cited commonplace, but not many children or even adults today know of the several layers therein, each with its own special punishment like being surrounded by excreta, eaten by snakes or worms or boiled in hot oil— "*Manush na Jokkho*" opens with just such a vivid description. Again, in "*Kalo Chakti*", the dominant novum of invulnerable alien black discs are compared to the Nivata Kavacha, the clan of Asuras who wear invulnerable armor, "30,000,000 in number...comparable unto cliffs and lying scattered like crags", who remain undefeated by Indra or Ravana till they are destroyed by Arjuna (Ganguli, Section CLXX). With television, internet, computers and increasingly aggressive mass media catering to the ever more "westernized", English-educated young reader in Bengal, exposure to traditional storytelling in both private and public spheres is on the wane²³. Even though a relatively minor episode, details like these fall out of more commercialized versions of epic storytelling (like television serials) and their inclusion here provides a more comprehensive picture of the mythological tradition to young readers.

²³ The divide between the English-educated cosmopolitan elite children and the majority of Bangla-educated children from rural areas and townships continues to grow. Many upwardly mobile Bengali parents today do not encourage their children to learn Bangla in school or read Bangla fiction outside of it, acceding to the dominance of the Harry Potters. These elite children, often from nuclear families in cubby-hole condos, often grow up without ever hearing epic or puranic stories or folklore from grandparents. The majority and the more likely audience for this series today, ie. children who have only a nominal grasp over English fluency, are also too caught up in becoming more competitive to care much about mythological stories. In the public sphere, traditional performances like *pala* and *kirtan* or even the evening gathering with elders telling stories have also become rarer.

Aliens aliens everywhere: Rasa and the science-fictional grotesque

About two-thirds of the narratives in this series revolve around aliens; the remaining third involve rivalries with mad-scientists or hybrid creatures like androids and cyborgs. Aliens come in all manner of shapes, some resembling earthly flora and fauna, like bacteria, virus, plants, crabs and dolphins; some are anthropomorphic, some formless and some utterly unimaginable by the human mind. They are also diverse in intention, from harmful to benign and indifferent to curious. But statistically, most of them have one thing in common: they are imaginatively grotesque, often far more than the “sources” on which they are based.

For instance, in Piers Anthony’s *Prostho Plus*, the alien is described thus:

It was humanoid, but only vaguely so. A great flat forehead dropped down to widely spaced yet narrow eyes and the nose was a triple slit. The mouth was closed, set off oddly by thin purple lips...the hand was grey and the fingers appeared to be double-jointed (4).

The same alien in the Nat Boltu story “*Dantalo*” (“Teethy”) becomes:

The eyes were two squares covered by a fine green mesh...pupils, if present, were indistinguishable. Over the squares, a balcony like a car’s headlight jutted out. There were no eyebrows. The whole head was a cube, like a wooden block. Only the top looked like an upside-down *hanṛi* [rice-cooking pot]. The four sides and bottom were brick-colored, but the top was dark green. [It had] no hair, but dinosaur-like thorns with marble-like smooth ends which were bright orange. It was three feet tall, completely naked, with an egg-shaped, perpetually moist body, webbed hands and feet with six digits, and dripping eyes. It sat on a chair dangling its short legs. (1: 282-83)

The description as well as the reaction it evokes in Nat Boltu work in the intersection between the three rasas *bībhatsa*, *bhayānaka* and *hāsya*, of which the first two were neglected in the Sanskrit tradition but have become only too relevant in the modern context. *Bhayānaka* or the terrifying rasa arises from *vibhāvas* like “ghastly noises” and “supernatural beings”; *bībhatsa*,

or the disgusting, on the other hand, arises out of causes like “seeing what is ugly, unpleasant...and undesired” (Masson and Patwadhan 1: 54-5). The *anubhāvas* or consequences of the two rasas also overlap. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* further states: “The sight of the disgusting (gives rise to) the terrifying” (Masson and Patwadhan 1:47-48). The moist body and rounded green head may be reminiscent of the *kappa* from Japanese folklore, and combined with the other details create a comically grotesque picture. The creature is an aberration not only of the human form or proportions pleasing to the human consciousness; it bears no resemblance to any earthly flora or fauna, but is a strange and unpleasant combination of both the natural (thorns, webbed digits) and the constructed (square eyes and cubical head). The brick-green-orange color contrast is visually jarring and its moist, slimy body is reminiscent of snakes or worms listed as causes of *bibhatsa*.²⁴

Nat Boltu, on suddenly seeing this creature, displays the appropriate gestures or *anubhāvas* pertaining to *bhayānaka*, like “sweating, stuttering, trembling, break in voice, anxiety, confusion and panic”, in anticipatory fear of its unknown acts or intentions (Masson and Patwadhan 1:54-55). After the initial shock however, the alien’s crying eyes, short dangling legs and general attitude of supplication heightens incongruity, a *vibhāva* (cause) common to both *bhayānaka* and *hāsya*. The affect shifts then from pure horror to the comically grotesque; as Arindam Chakrabarty argues, “disgust blends with horror in the macabre (and) with laughter in the grotesque” (352). Once the comic is introduced, *adbhuta* is just a shot step away, also on the axis of incongruity or disjunction but now with clearer grasp of the creature’s strangeness which

²⁴ Istvan Csicsery-Ronay’s analysis of the science-fictional grotesque also makes a similar argument: “The grotesque...makes the subject feel fearful awe at the possibility that one’s own mind...cannot keep up with the metamorphoses of materiality; that the categorical containments of natural physicality we wish to see as scientific truths...are catastrophically unstable and will undermine our thoughts by displaying to us the *chaos-producing resistance of bodies to order*” (emphasis mine, “On the Grotesque in SF”, 80-81). But a rasa analysis allows us to identify specific elements, which Csicsery-Ronay’s abstracted and rarified discussion does not.

is no longer a perceived threat; the negative associations of horror are transformed to the positive associations of *adbhuta*. Most aliens and hybrid creatures, and even some human antagonists, are described in a similar comically grotesque manner, highlighting their deviations from the norm, though the effects or *anubhavas* are not always so explicit.

Use of Language

Despite the great unevenness in the storyworld, the narratives are held together by a literary style that remains consistent over the series. Alliteration and onomatopoeia are used liberally, in the naming of both characters and stories, referring back to the sort of satirical-ironic usage seen in Sukumar Ray's *Heñshoram Huñshiyarer Diary* (1922), but the ostensible object of satire and irony here is *not* colonial science. For instance, "Santrash Sen"—Sen is a common Bengali Hindu last name, while "santrash" means "terror" and is obviously not a common first name—is a worldwide mafia boss, and is appropriately cruel and malicious²⁵. Characteristic first names are juxtaposed with common last names, setting up a recognizable identification pattern usually for antagonists. Alliteration is also liberally present in the names of many stories, especially the later ones, for instance "*Raja Rat'er Rohosyo*", "*Congo'r Bongobaba*" "*Kalochhayar Koral Kahini*" or "*Bajradanti Bibhishika*"; these are obvious, perhaps even to the non-Bengali reader. The parody/caricature implicit in these nomenclatures adds to the significant comic element in this series.

This pattern holds for our primary narrator Dinanath Nath as well. Dinanath, literally, "protector of the wretched" is one of Krishna's many names, and Nath (literally, protector or

²⁵ Other examples would be "Dhurondhor (tricky) Dhor", "Kopali (possessing a wide forehead/ another name for the goddess Kali) Kundu", "Tomoghno (expelling darkness/ignorance) Topdar" or "Dr. KanchuMachu" (shriveled in embarrassment or fear/sheepish; a Bangla caricature of Japanese names).

king/ruler) is a last name common in the Brahmin Kashyap *gotra* (sub-caste). Krishna, in Hindu mythology, is the god who preserves all creation; even though this association is not elaborated upon, Dinanath arguably performs that same function. Nat Boltu Chakra's name however has no mythological resonances. Chakra is possibly shortened from Chakrabarty, another common Bengali Hindu Brahmin last name²⁶, and while he did have a formal given name, he forgot it and the name Nat Boltu (literally “nut” and “bolt”) stuck as he was always puttering with mechanical parts in his lab²⁷. In the preface to the first collected volume, Bardhan asserts: “...I named him in such a way that young children, just by hearing the name, will know that this person does all sorts of bizarre and outlandish sciency stuff”. This juxtaposition of Hindu myth and “western” science has been noted in Shonku's microcosm, and is recurrent in this series as well.

Another characteristic linguistic peculiarity occurs when the narrative is ruptured by hilarious, limerick-style nonsensical poems, much in the mould of Sukumar Ray's “whimsies” in the collection *Abol Tabol* (1923; translated by Sampurna Chatterjee as *Wordygurdyboom!* 2004), though again lacking the implicit satire towards colonial rule and the colonized Bengali middle-class. For instance, in “*Subarna Golok*” (“Golden Sphere”), when aliens try to derail the space race by sending gem-studded asteroids to lure and destroy terrestrial spacecraft, renowned scientists from all over the world are sent on a space mission to stop the aliens. Once Nat Boltu

²⁶ The names of the two protagonists also represent the upper-caste dominance in Bengali intellectual life, further marginalizing the Hindu lower castes and Muslims— the prevalence of upper-caste Brahmin, Baidya (healer caste) and Kayastha (scribe caste) patronymics are unmistakable even in US academia: for instance, Gayatri Chakravorty, Partha Chatterjee, Ranajit Guha and Amartya Sen all hail from these three Bengali upper castes.

²⁷ Another explanation is that a childhood friend, while watching him energetically play soccer, remarked that the scientist's feet were like iron nuts and bolts; this seems to be a later addition and is mentioned only in one story “*Dajjal Darpan*”.

resolves the crisis, the other scientists surround him and break into ebullient dance accompanied by this “World Solidarity Anthem”²⁸:

[Part 1] Tarana... tarana... tarana (a)
 Put away your guns and cannons—(b)
 No more, brothers, no more! (a)
 Had enough of cold war (c)
 Zero earnings in our coffers—(c)
 Meanwhile we’ve become (d)
 Useless and empty—(a)
 Tarana... tarana... tarana (a)

[Part 2] With bad luck, burnt luck,
 Busted luck, broken luck,
 If you want to live—
 Take Nat-Boltu’s name
 And do the kowtow.
 Golden Sphere! Golden Sphere!
 Disappeared in a whiff
 What a nifty mantra! ²⁹ (2: 27)

While this song mentions a couple of plot points, the effect is of nonsensical and comic excess; “whimsy” or “nonsense” (*udhbhaṭa*) has often been pegged by contemporary critics as the tenth rasa³⁰, having much in common with *adbhuta*. It is “inherently pleasurable”, “valuable simply for its own sake” and “rooted in sophisticated aesthetics, linguistics and play with logic” (Heyman 5). By balancing “sense” and “nonsense”, a well-crafted “whimsy” invites interpretation, and generic examples tend to balance semantic or logical convolutions with “strict

²⁸ Original layout and punctuation retained. Original rhyme scheme indicated in parenthesis.

²⁹ Notes on translation: The rhymed poem is a “western” import to Bangla. Sanskrit and pre-colonial Bangla verse used syllabic meter, with codified and often complex sequences of short and long (*laghu* and *guru*) syllables and end-rhyme was uncommon in pre-colonial prosody. For part 1, while I was unable to translate in keeping with the original rhyme scheme, it is a literal translation; “tarana” is not a meaningful word here and resembles the *bol* or time-keeping chants used in classical and folk music. For part 2 however, the first couplet could not be translated literally. The original has “kopal” or forehead, which is the seat of fortune in Hindu commonplace, and I have translated it as “luck”. “Kopal” recurs five times in the poem: its adjectives literally translated are “ashes”, “burnt”, “rubbish”, “broken” and “camel”. “Camel-forehead” makes little sense in Bangla; but the idea is not difficult to approximate, as in being grateful and obeisant to Nat Boltu.

³⁰ As previously discussed in the Introduction, apart from the eight rasas found in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* proper, and Abhinavagupta’s ninth rasa *sānta*, none of the numerous other rasas proposed by classical Sanskrit literary scholars gained universal acceptance. See Raghavan, *The Number of Rasas*.

poetic forms” following the rules of grammar, syntax and phonetics, especially onomatopoeia and alliteration. For instance, Michael Heyman notes that one of the characteristics of Indian-language nonsense verse (not so much in Indian English) is “nonsense tautology”, where “two different words or phrases are used side by side, implying a *different* meaning but actually having the *same* meaning”, as seen in the first couplet from Part 2 above (Heyman 12). While these ditties aren’t the best examples of “whimsy” that Bangla has to offer, they are certainly unexpected and refreshing in a SF narrative, given especially that nonsense poetry in SF is somewhat of a rarity. In fact, all the examples considered above in the “Use of Language” section are instances of comic excess, which enliven the plot but do not generally affect the SF novums present.

Another striking aspect of language use is in its careful detailing. Ancient and exotic scripts like hieroglyphics and cuneiform have many dedicated passages of infodump, and a handful of antagonists like Tomoghno Topdar are scholars of ancient languages. Nat Boltu’s grasp on languages, of course, surpasses them all, much like the polyglot Shonku, though we aren’t told how many languages Nat Boltu has mastered. Like the typical educated Bengali middle-class male, Dinanath is more-or-less proficient in English and Hindi. Since most of the human antagonists are Bengali, English is rarely used, except occasionally with military chiefs and foreigners, and in these instances Dinanath clearly mentions that he’s translating on the reader’s behalf. This is standard practice in Bangla genre fiction, especially prevalent in Satyajit Ray’s serialized detective Felu-da series; whenever colonial and postcolonial Bengali protagonists communicate with people who do not know Bangla, the narrator intervenes directly and notes the act of translation.

When the question of how to communicate with sentient aliens arises, pre-1960's Anglo-American SF has often unproblematically offered English as the universal language or used machines like the universal-translator. This series, for the most part, replaces the universal-translator with telepathic abilities of aliens to communicate directly with humans. In a few instances, however, when language takes center-stage, Bangla is always foregrounded. For instance, in "*Dantalo*" ("Teethy") mentioned earlier, a grotesque weeping alien suddenly appears in Nat Boltu's drawing room and he is at a loss as to what it wants. This story "borrows" the dominant novum—an alien whose teeth are not for eating but writing messages by imprinting marks on a solid surface—from the first chapter of Piers Anthony's short novel *Prostho Plus* (1973). In both narratives the alien has a painful cavity that they want the human to treat. While Dr. Dillingham from *Prostho Plus* fixes the toothache and is kidnapped and sold to aliens to fix teeth problems, ending up as the Director of the Galactic University of Dentistry, the plot trajectory is completely different in the Nat Boltu story. Nat Boltu quickly recognizes that this particular alien does not have telepathic abilities or vocal chords, and proceeds to teach it the Bangla alphabet, even whipping up a machine that can decode the alien's teeth imprints and encode his own words. Thereafter, he teases out the alien's "altruistic" plan of settling on Earth and modifying humankind so that they can live underwater and utilize all of Earth's resources. That outcome is of course undesirable and Nat Boltu, instead of fixing its toothache, insults the alien so skillfully with choice Bangla derogatives that it abandons said plan and departs in a huff. And Nat Boltu, unbeknownst to the world, saves it again.

Bangla again takes center-stage in *Time Car* (1981), this time on a galactic scale. Of the three distinct sections in the novella, the second section "borrows" much of its action and the dominant novum from an episode from BBC's tremendously popular Dr. Who series, "The

Invisible Enemy” (Season 15, Serial 2, 1977), which (also) takes place in “5321 AD on the satellite Titan”. It is impossible to ascertain whether Bardhan had access to the BBC televised version or the novelized version. In the televised version the question of language is minor, indicated only by small linguistic shifts like “Exit” to “Eggsit” on door signs. In *Time Car* however, Dinanath and Nat Boltu, on crashing there on their time machine, are pleasantly surprised to find that far-future humans have adopted Bangla as the sole galactic language, as it is the only non-hegemonic human language capable of incorporating and expressing the multiplicities of emotion and science. All other languages have therefore become obsolete. Dinanath describes these far-future human descendents as a mix of all races with atypical combinations like blue eyes, red hair and dark skin on a single individual, a detail (unsurprisingly) absent from “The Invisible Enemy”. Their names are also single letters or conjuncts from the Bangla alphabet—humans have long dispensed with honorifics and patronymics—for instance, “Professor Marius” from the Dr. Who television serial becomes “Kou” in the Nat Boltu story. In Kou’s words, “Now there is only one race- Human race; only one language- Bangla language” (2: 364). Referring back to the earlier argument on the Bengali-centeredness in this series, this marked bias towards Bangla, by bringing the problematic of language and translation to the forefront, interrogates in quite the tongue-in-cheek way, unstated assumptions of English and Hindi language hegemony in postcolonial Bengal and India.

Representation of Women

Female characters, whether human, alien or hybrid, appear in 15 stories, both in minor and major roles, though there are no instances of non-binary gender characterizations. Given the

almost-exclusively male space-time we have encountered in the two previous series, even a token inclusion of female characters here deserves at least brief discussion. Women characters usually function as “donors” or “helpers” in this series, following Vladimir Propp’s morphology (“Excerpts from: Vladímir Propp”). For instance, Pinky, a teenage girl who gets embroiled in a rival scientist’s chocolate-eating whirlwind scheme, is feisty and tomboyish, vying for Nat Boltu’s grandfatherly affection and annoying Dinanath to no end. Then there is the genetically mutated creature Moyna, who resembles a many-tentacled drum and who takes a romantic interest Dinanath’s friend Pares; her grotesque form “cures” the latter of his feverish yearning for marriage, an ailment common to aging middle-class Bengali bachelors. Again, in “*Somay Sinduk*” (“Time Crate”), a rival scientist kidnaps a giant alien female draped in shiny silver strings from the cretaceous era; Nat Boltu calls her Moydanobi, after the mythical Moydanob, the master-architect of the *asuras* (Wilkins). All these women serve to enliven the plot with their peculiarities, but ultimately remain minor characters.

Another type of minor female character is the ubiquitous scientist’s assistant, like Ellora, Katya or Amy Wallace. In these situations one could expect romantic undertones between Dinanath and these unattached women, but he’s too busy being sidelined and jealous. Nat Boltu seems to recruit them for no other reason than to annoy Dinanath; he certainly could do without their scientific expertise. For instance, in “*Tuhin Tamal Swet Prohelika*”, which is little more than an abridged adaptation of Lovecraft’s *At the Mountains of Madness*, we encounter Ellora, a Bengali aeronautical engineer who has mastered the secret of flying saucers, and whom Nat Boltu persuades to build special aircraft for his Antarctic voyage. This addition is unexpected especially because no such female character appears in the all-male Lovecraftian world. While Ellora’s gruesome fate of being captured and dissected by the “Old Ones” parallels that of the

geologist Professor Lake from Lovecraft's novel, her "womanly" characteristics like intuition and empathy (which, in *Time Car*, Dinanath himself claims to possess in exactly those terms) are downplayed and hardly affect the plot.

Perhaps the only rationale in imagining this character as a woman is the relative rarity of Bengali women scientists and explorers, tying back to the sort of wish-fulfillment seen in the characterizations of the two protagonists as well: a vision that Bengali women do not have to be confined to their traditional role of housewives and can contribute more to the world. The single physical characteristic that Bardhan favors for friendly female characters is height: Ellora, Kopali Kundu and several other Bengali women are described as being between 5'5" and 5'9" tall. This seems to be another aspect of the Bengali wish-fulfillment fantasy, as a good majority of Bengali women are petite, which makes rugged outdoor activities more challenging and bars them outright from some professions.

Finally, two novellas feature strong women antagonists who give Nat Boltu a hard time and stand out among the other villains, be they alien, human or otherwise. The first collected volume opens with "*Kalochhayar Koral Kahini*" (The Macabre Tale of the Black Shadow", 2004), a tale of a future Earth under alien rule for 4000 years. These aliens, a race of monstrous warrior queens, have nearly depopulated Earth and keep a small population of humans as slaves under tight surveillance. The antagonist, Queen Dhumabati, is exceedingly cruel without a single redeeming quality, not even sparing her own sisters, and unleashes a new plan to cull 2/3rd of the human male population in keeping with the female-to- male ratio from their own species. Possessing all the usual villain-ish qualities like nearly-interminable lifespan, superhuman toughness and telepathy, Queen Dhumabati is also an accomplished scientist who has uncovered the secret of immortality from her researches into ancient Earth texts. While it is not explained

how or when Nat Boltu and Dinanath get there (presumably using their time machine), they initially appear to be more awed than defiant. Queen Dhumabati's stature and powers make her an especially tough villain for Nat Boltu to oust, and his plan to defeat her and liberate earth has a few major setbacks, and he succeeds only with help from ghosts. The overall tone of this novella is misogynistic, pinning all the negative attributes of these alien queens on their gender, which reflects on womankind in the absence of balancing, friendly human women in this novella.

“*Chemical X*”, however, takes a less misogynist approach with the second major female antagonist, Miss Dimi, created by the evil scientist-cum-gambling mafia boss Dr. X with a combination of Himalayan herbs and stolen brains of three exceptional scientists. After Nat Boltu fails to solve the mystery of the scientists' stolen brains, Ms. Dimi appears out of nowhere and takes the world by storm. She is described as being as beautiful as the goddess of prosperity Laxmi and as intelligent and erudite as the goddess of learning, Saraswati— in short, perfect in every way imaginable. In her worldwide rallies to enthralled audiences, she preaches the philosophy of Epicurus and Chārvāka and defeats proponents of organized religion in debates on the merits of enjoying this earthly life to the fullest and not worrying about the afterlife. Conversant in ancient languages and religious scriptures, she even quotes a Sanskrit *shloka* (verse): “*yāvaj jīvaṃ sukhaṃ jīvet/ ṛinaṃ kritva ghrītaṃ piveṭ*”, ie. “So long as you are alive, enjoy yourself/ drink ghee (clarified butter) even if you have to borrow for it”. This is a spurious version (likely a parody) of a famous *shloka* from Chārvāka: “*yāvaj jīvaṃ sukhaṃ jīven nāsti mṛtyor agocaraḥ / bhasmībhūtasya dehasya punarāgamaṇaṃ kutaḥ*”, meaning “Let a man live happily as long as there is no death [because] from death no-body escapes; when also the body is burnt to ashes, from where, indeed, a future life will be?” (R. Bhattacharya 73; Del Toso 544).

Parodying Sanskrit verses is quite common in Bangla comic and satirical fiction since the 19th century and Bardhan clearly refers back to that literary tradition. While her character trajectory follows that of the “reformed villain”, it is interesting that Miss Dimi utterly rejects traditional gender roles and chooses celibacy and spirituality over procreation and familial duties. It is also interesting that her superhuman brain is constructed from brains of three old and wise male scientists. This can be read as an ironic twist on a prevalent sexist commonplace that men are worth more as they age and accumulate more knowledge and power, while womens’ worth decreases with age and reduced reproductive ability.

Postcolonial Plagiarism?

Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better... The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn...

T.S. Eliot

In an academic setting, plagiarism or using others’ words or ideas without proper acknowledgement is a form of academic misconduct and students or faculty caught plagiarizing face severe punitive measures. Plagiarism in academia is linked to the ethical issue of dishonesty and violating the “honor code” common to educational institutions. But taking a closer look, especially in literary fiction, two rebuttals come to the fore. Firstly, notions of plagiarism and intellectual property are closely tied to capitalism, authorship and property in the post-Enlightenment era and have a history of a mere three hundred years or so (Buranen et. al 19). Secondly, these predominantly “western” notions have been unevenly assimilated in “non-western” cultures, particularly in the “east”- South Asia, China and Japan, which continue to

defer to established masters (Buranen et. al 66). In this context, contemporary literary criticism has been much harsher towards instances of plagiarism from a Kaavya Viswanathan or a Yambo Ouloguem than a T.S. Eliot, James Joyce or Ian McEwan (see Block, “How Opal Mehta”; A. Singh, “Richard Posner”; Buranen et. al 136-38). While this can be read in the light of the familiar discourse on colonial and neocolonial hegemony of the “west over the rest”, that debate is too complex and beyond the scope of this chapter.

In the case of the Nat Boltu series, Bardhan clearly “borrows” ideas, novums and even entire plots from other writers; that is undeniable. However, since the original publication details are unavailable, it is impossible to know whether the “sources” were credited or not; in Bangla genre fiction, both credited and un-credited “borrowings” are quite common. Close collaborator Ranen Ghosh calls this process “transcreation”, where Bangla SF writers would study foreign SF narratives and then produce their own version in Bangla (De et al. *Kalpabiswa*). Bardhan’s own work in the SF magazines does credit some stories as “*bideshi golper chhaya obolomone*” or “based on the shadow of foreign stories”, though not always crediting the specific “source”. Other series like Manoranajan Bhattacharya’s Hukakashi series (1936-38) or Bangladeshi author Quazi Anwar Hussain’s Masud Rana series (1966-) do not credit their “sources”—Hercule Poirot and spy thrillers by Ian Fleming, Alistair Mclean, Jack Higgins etc., respectively. However, even if we do not give Bardhan the benefit of the doubt, several arguments can be forwarded in his defense.

Bardhan’s kalpabigyan lies in the intersection between “western SF” and “Indian mythology”, both of which have a significant history of intertextuality. In genre fiction and particularly SF, the very presence of a (however amorphous) “megatext” establishes a body of shared concepts; surely any SF author who writes about robots isn’t plagiarizing from Isaac

Asimov, even though, like the Bangladeshi author Md. Zafar Iqbal, s/he may be inspired by Asimov's work! Even complex novums, like the presence of infinitesimally smaller worlds in sub-atomic space, are common enough within the "megatext" as to not warrant accusations of plagiarism. Bardhan's other source of inspiration, pre-colonial Sanskrit and Bangla literature, dealt mostly with classical mythology or folklore where stories were already known to the audience. The "*pratibha*" or "genius" of the poet lay in formulating new details and expressions; form and style were emphasized over innovation in plot trajectory. In the colonial and postcolonial contexts, while "originality" was increasingly prized, Bengali mainstream authors did not hesitate to draw from "western" poets and novelists, molding the material to suit their own socio-cultural contexts³¹.

Close comparative readings between "sources" and the Nat Boltu stories also show that Bardhan generally improves on the material at hand. For instance, the Dr. Who episode *The Invisible Enemy* is replete with corny, uninspired dialogues, wooden acting and hideous special effects³²; in Nat Boltu's *Time Car* much of the same material becomes genuinely estranging and humorous given the pre-existing relationship between Nat Boltu and Dinanath. Imaginative descriptions and language use especially paints a much more intriguing picture. The alien virus, for instance, speaks in distinctly Sanskritized diction and appears to be a much more powerful enemy than the poorly modeled giant green shrimp in the Dr. Who episode, which remains utterly unremarkable even within the gamut of the villainous monsters in Dr. Who series.

Bardhan is also very selective with his "sources"; the most famous of the "borrowings" I was

³¹ For instance, a trajectory of cross-cultural literary transactions can be traced from the Upanishads via Orientalist scholars to the English Romantic poets (Keats and Shelly particularly) to Rabindranath Tagore to Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (five stages of grief), though some arrows in this trajectory may be obscured by the devaluation of colonial knowledge.

³² As it turns out, much of the plot here is "borrowed" in turn from *Fantastic Voyage* (1966), an American SF film based on a story by Otto Klement and Jerome Bixby, with the screenplay/novelization by Isaac Asimov (See Sinnott).

able to track are *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), JG Ballard's *The Crystal World* (1966) and of course Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936), all of which are little known outside their immediate readership/ fan-groups.

By bringing together many minor but remarkable SF narratives within a single rubric, the Nat Boltu series and Bardhan's other writing introduced the international SF megatext to the Bengali reader in ways neither Mitra or Ray were able to. In my reading, Bardhan and Md. Zafar Iqbal (on the other side of the border), have been the most influential promoters of popular SF in Bangla, creating a niche and a SF literate readership familiar with the conventions of the genre. This is quite clear from Bardhan's positioning of the SF reader as a "*rasik(a)*" or connoisseur of the specific pleasures of SF as mentioned earlier. But creating this readership was a challenge for two reasons. Firstly, before the opening of the Indian market to international trade and the introduction of television and internet in the late 1990's-early 2000's, availability of "western" SF in was quite limited in Bengal³³. Secondly, even if some SF in English was available, a good majority of Bengali readers were (and continue to be) not fluent enough in English to enjoy the books in the original, as attested by a flourishing translation industry in Bangladesh. The language barrier, especially in genre fiction, compelled many authors to not only translate but also adapt and localize foreign settings and characters in ways palatable to the Bengali audience, with little regard for copyright or intellectual property laws. As such, while the issue of plagiarism remains, the great social impact of these "borrowings", which fostered broader literacy vis-à-vis international conventions, must also be acknowledged.

³³ As an avid bookstore-browser in Kolkata even after the opening of the Indian market in the 1990's, I found much "classic" SF by Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke but few or none by later authors like Philip K. Dick, Ursula Le Guin or Samuel Delany. Russian SF is the exception. The first SF novel I read was a Bangla translation of Alexi Tolstoy's 1923 *Aelita*. Owing to ideological links between the Soviet Union and the Marxist government in West Bengal (1977-2011), many Russian books and anthologies, (especially science stories and Russian and Ukrainian folk-tales), were available both in English and Bangla translation. Notable among these was the children's magazine *Misha*.

Critics Kwame Appiah and Marilyn Randall, among others, have also analyzed instances of plagiarism by postcolonial authors as a means of resistance in the aftermath of colonization. In her essay “Imperial Plagiarism” included in the *Postcolonial Plagiarism* volume, Randall argues that colonial plagiarism occurs in two stages around the metaphor of plagiarism-as-conquest. The first stage is a “culture of mimicry” as a “personal, institutional and cultural response to colonialism” as seen in analyses by Homi Bhaba. The second, and more relevant in the context of the Nat Boltu series, is an “oppositional enactment” by “appropriating the language of the colonizer and forcing it into the expression of the colonized linguistic and cultural identity”; this strategy of “self-conscious inversion and subversion” is to be found in plagiarism as well (Buranen et. al 136).

That Bardhan was not entirely unaware of this angle is demonstrated in his prefatory comment: “I had an itch to show that Bengali scientists were not inconsequential (and that Bengali youth could be daredevils” (1: i). The Nat Boltu series not only holds up a picture of Bengali accomplishment through the two protagonists and carves a space for the postcolonial within the world-at-large, much like Ghana-da or Shonku, but more importantly, also appropriates those very narratives of colonial and neocolonial domination. The SF stories he appropriates are on the main representative of white male supremacy, where racial, gendered or cultural others are either underrepresented or depicted as monsters. By introducing local and linguistic elements in excess of “source” content, this “self-conscious inversion and subversion” enacts plagiarism as reverse colonialism, not as transgression but morally justified celebration (Buranen et. al 137). Referring back to the epigraph to this section, while it is ultimately up to the reader to decide whether Bardhan is a “good poet” or not, hopefully this chapter has

demonstrated in Bardhan's favor that, to quote Appiah, "if this...is theft, it is the adventurous theft of the kleptomaniac, who dares us to catch him at it"(65).

Conclusion

Overall, the Nat Boltu series focuses on more contemporary contexts and delineates some significant shifts in the literary-historical trajectory of kalpabigyan. Instead of either a rigorous adherence to scientific principles (as in the Ghana-da series) or loosely scientific flights of imagination (as in the Shonku series), this series melds concepts and tropes from "hard" sciences, "pseudoscience", techno-occult, mythology and the generic SFF megatext to create a chaotic yet fascinating storyworld over the series, especially with the inclusion of an astounding plenitude of alien "others", which kalpabigyan had been missing till then. The series also presents varied responses to the postcolonial condition. Firstly, the series foregrounds a regional Bengali identity of its protagonists Nat Boltu and Dinanath against the encroaching intra-national hegemonies of Hindi-Hindu imperialism by establishing their intellectual and heroic prowess, and by extrapolating the use of the language itself imaginatively in this and other worlds. Secondly, its inclusion of major and minor female characters presents a vision of empowered womanhood appropriate in contemporary times. And finally, by appropriating and "transcreating" the very narratives of "western" SF that had enshrined the white male hero and made monsters out of racial and gendered "others", the series enacts plagiarism as reverse colonialism.

In the next chapter, I take a small leap back in time to Premendra Mitra's dystopia *Manu Dwadosh* (1964), which shows a different sort of engagement with history and scientificity than seen in previous chapters.

Utopias and Dystopias

CHAPTER IV

PREMENDRA MITRA'S DYSTOPIC NOVEL *MANU DWADOSH* (1964)¹

Premendra Mitra (1904-1988)—poet, novelist, essayist, short-story writer and filmmaker, remains one of the most prolific and critically acclaimed writers of modern Bengal. He captured the literary limelight in the 1920's and continued to write mainstream fiction and non-fiction and *kishor sahitya* throughout the 70's and 80's, as previously outlined in Chapter I and the Introduction. His dystopic novel, *Manu Dwadosh* (*The Twelfth Manu*, 1964), has, however received little critical attention so far, especially in comparison to his more celebrated Ghana-da series. This is despite being both conceptually and stylistically more remarkable than most of his other standalone kalpabigyan, and despite the fact that it was selected by Sahitya Akademi² for a complete translation a mere six years after its first publication, as representative of “Bengali Literature: Fiction”. *Manu Dwadosh* is conceptually challenging in its responses to the shared concerns of 1960's SF worldwide, its engagement with mythic, conventional and lived histories and its raising of timeless questions on the meaning of existence. Stylistically, *Manu Dwadosh*

¹ A version of this chapter has been published as “Estrangement, History, and Aesthetic Relish: A Reading of Premendra Mitra's *Manu Dwadosh*”, *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 43, no. 3, 2016, pp. 459-478. Parenthetical citations of page numbers 407-456 refer to the text of *Manu Dwadosh* in *Collected Kalpabigyan*.

² Sahitya Akademi is the Indian “Academy of Letters” responsible for promoting literature and translations in all major Indian languages. Only a small handful of texts that exhibit literary excellence and/or have achieved a canonical or near-canonical status within their respective vernacular language traditions are likely to be translated to English, though this pattern is changing now. For readers who do not read Bangla, this selection inevitably carries a kind of representative status.

employs a highly elevated and Sanskritised diction alien to Mitra's other SF (which is perhaps one of the reasons why it never gained popularity comparable to Ghanada) and its liberal use of literary suggestion evokes a trajectory of aesthetic-emotive response.

Reading the text through three perspectives—the concept of the novum, the construction of history and the rasa theory (emotive aesthetics)—I argue that while the novums let us “perceive our own world anew”, the text ironically problematizes notions of history and heroism by undermining the functional roles of the historian and the conventional hero, then posits them in opposition to a deeply pessimistic worldview that is itself undermined and left unresolved in the climactic denouement. This ironic movement raises fundamental questions on the meaning and necessity of human existence and echoes Gernsback's famous definition of SF as “prophetic vision” (Stableford et al.) or Aldiss' “the search for a definition of man and his status in the universe... in our advanced but confused state of knowledge (science)” (25). In so doing, *Manu Dwadosh* interrogates the unstated assumptions of a good majority of future-oriented, positivist, progressive and optimistic Anglocentric SF writing.

In the Introduction and previous chapters, I have discussed and demonstrated with specific examples, how rasa theory is a useful framework for analysis of genre fiction broadly and kalpabigyan in particular. My intention is not merely one of novelty— terms like rasa (aesthetic relish) and *rasika* (one who can relish rasa) loosely pervade descriptive-aesthetic yardsticks of literary production in Bangla even today, and hybrid categories like “adventure-rasa” are regularly employed to refer to the specific aesthetic pleasures derived from an adventure-type story (Bhattacharya 187). And while it is not strictly necessary or possible to determine whether Mitra and other kalpabigyan authors were consciously using rasa principles to shape the emotive ambience of their works, it can certainly be acknowledged that any author

writes within a literary tradition and these elements were received as part of a literary-cultural heritage³. In this chapter, too, I present a different configuration and detailed interpretation of *adbhuta* rasa, drawing from Bharata and Abhinavagupta (and their commentators in English), and ways in which it interacts with other rasas to accentuate the aesthetic-emotive responses of kalpabigyan. Further, I use the rasa reading to draw a parallel locus for thematic “failure” in the text: the failure of history parallels the failure of the hero figure in this narrative.

Kalpabigyan, SF and *Manu Dwadosh*

As Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay argues, kalpabigyan, the Bangla term roughly analogous to SF, has multiple referents that make its scope much larger than “Science Fiction” as understood in English. *Kalpa* is the etymological root for *kalpana* or imagination, as well as a marker of time in Hindu cosmology—one *kalpa* or aeon is one day of the Creator Brahma lasting 4.32 billion mortal years (*Vishnu Purana*) while *bigyan* refers to scientific knowledge. This combination of imagination and science “refers to the transformation of material knowledge across time” and potentially allows “mythological references and abstract philosophical speculation...borrowing chiefly from religion” to reflect on “what is often a straightforward fictional futuristic tale” (Chattopadhyay, “Bengal”).

This understanding of kalpabigyan, which creates a niche for apparently non-scientific concerns that are explored from a vantage of estrangement, however, need not necessarily be at odds with more widely accepted definitional attempts by Darko Suvin. For a majority of kalpabigyan in the fictional mode, one or more of the novums/what if’s/factors of estrangement

³ For a rasa analysis of three 19th and 20th century Bangla novels, see Dimock et. al. 212-227. For a rasa analysis of Satyajit Ray’s *Apu Trilogy* and *Jalsaghar*, see Cooper, 15-75.

are indeed intrinsically connected to a cognitive/scientific principle and the worlds of these stories are internally consistent with the physical laws of their respective universes. They also share “with the dominant literature of our civilization a mature approach analogous to that of modern science and philosophy” (*Metamorphoses*, 11). However, reading only the scientific takes away from the philosophical/transcendental or as the case may be, the self-reflexive humor or irony in the stories, rendering their reading incomplete. Moreover, framing within the kalpabigyan paradigm is particularly appropriate for reading the novel in question, Premendra Mitra’s *Manu Dwadosh*, as both “mythological” and “abstract philosophical speculation” serve to heighten the estrangement effect in this text.

The novums of *Manu Dwadosh*

The novums in *Manu Dwadosh* and their resonance in the wide body of ideas common to SF-and-Fantasy parlance, ie. the megatext, are as follows:

a) The pale of mankind has been reduced to a mere 300 odd individuals from three warring clans: Pravar, Eusov, and Kafram. They are hunter-gatherers, use no advanced gadgets/weapons and have forgotten even the simplest tenets of the natural sciences. Here, it is worthwhile to remember that in contrast to the positivistic, future advancement rhetoric common to much SF, the trope of future degeneration is at least as old as H. G. Wells’ *The Time Machine* (1895). In kalpabigyan, too, Hemendra Kumar Roy’s *Amanushik Maanush (Inhuman Man/Overman)*, 1950) deals squarely with “the Aryan mythos (of degeneration)... as well as other Orientalist stereotypes... that had been a constant feature of the Indian national movement.” (Chattopadhyay, “Bengal”).

b) While members of the Pravar and Eusov are predominantly male, the Kafram are predominantly female. All three clans previously hunted and captured members of the opposite sex from other clans to serve as husbands or wives to the entire commune. However, in the present narrative time, gender-power relations between the three clans are inverted: the Pravar and Eusov have ceased the practice but the Kafram have not. Unlike the two male-predominant clans who treat their commune-wives like queens, it is rumored that the Kafram torture and emasculate any men they can capture.

As a trope, the warrior-woman is almost universally recognized; however, it is their supremacy in all power relations in this storyworld that raises this particular configuration to the level of a novum. From the Amazons of Greek myth to Wonder Woman of DC Comics, strong, warlike yet beautiful women have both attracted and repelled the male creative imagination. The novel opens with a description of two young Kafram women attempting to capture a man in a marshy bog—“grace and strength melding into greater exquisiteness... the scant covering [on their bodies] only accentuates the splendor of their feminine beauty” (409). The narrator contrasts the whiteness and darkness of the women and declares that if a poet had been present there, he would surely compare them to sisters Usha (dawn) and Ratri (night), minor goddesses in the Hindu legion. However, the only man fortunate enough to have seen these two beauties together was in no condition to sprout poetry, on account of trying to escape from their trap alive (410). Later, Buban, the man who they were attempting to capture (who turns out to be the hero-figure of the narrative), conjectures that the women’s vitality and warlike disposition comes from their biological ability to bear children, which is the single most desired function in this world (425).

c) The birth of a baby, while a commonplace enough incident, is a factor of estrangement in this particular world ravaged by infertility and stillbirths, to the extent that no new babies have survived in the past 15 years and mankind is soon doomed to extinction. Born of a mother who is inexplicably free from the affliction of radioactive gamma-sores that are a mark of pride in this technoscientifically primitive, hunter-gatherer society, and hunted by the Kafram horde that impose their rigid clan conventions over the continuation of the human race, the baby is the only ray of hope in a bleak world.

d) The world has been reduced to its present state by a series of nuclear apocalypses, which have caused widespread infertility in humans. This genesis-narrative is offered in variant iterations by two sources—archeological evidence unearthed by the self-styled historian Duru and clan-lore passed down through generations to the Chief-Mother of the Kafram clan. The rediscovery of this forgotten history is also a major preoccupation of the novel.

Nuclear apocalypse is undoubtedly the dominant *novum* in the novel, reminiscent of Fredric Jameson's argument that the "future" is "merely the future of one moment of what is now our own past", thus "historical and dated" ("Progress versus Utopia", 150-1). Within the "writing practice whose discourse is diacritically marked by the imprint of a specific historical, sociological and cultural matrix" or the "grapholect" of the 1960's, one of the most palpable fears was undoubtedly that of "mutually assured destruction" and nuclear holocaust engendered by the Cold War (Malmgren, *Worlds Apart*, 8). Walter M. Miller's *A Canticle for Liebowitz* (1960), Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* (1963) or Philip K. Dick's *Dr. Bloodmoney* (1965) are merely three examples of how the possibility of nuclear holocaust was a dominant literary problematic explored by SF within that decade. With the dissolution of the Cold War, the possibility of nuclear holocaust also decreased in importance as a *novum*, and SF interest has

since shifted to more contemporary concerns such as artificial intelligence, universal surveillance, eugenics and biological terrorism. Today, nuclear apocalypse as an SF trope has become so familiar that it belongs more squarely within the megatext than as an independent innovation or novum, and is usually deployed as a setting for post-apocalyptic narratives.

Related to the possibility of a nuclear apocalypse is the ethical and moral question of how science is used and misused; a question that has plagued SF writers and historians of science and technology equally. Mitra's praxis seems endorse the worldview that science and technology are essentially forces of good and acquire malevolence in the wrong hands; as seen previously, Ghana-da, the protagonist of more than 60 SF tall-tales, is more often than not called upon to thwart the efforts of mad scientists and greedy entrepreneurs, who would not hesitate to manipulate technoscientific advancement to the detriment of the underprivileged. Mitra's fiction presents a moral universe where the narrator is tasked with standing for the good of humanity, irrespective of the outcome of the story. And it is within this moral universe that we can locate the second most pressing aspect of Jameson's "historical and dated" argument, and recognize how *Manu Dwadosh* defamiliarizes one of the most urgent concerns of its immediate context in post-Independence India— mob mentality leading to communal violence. The sundering of the Bengali-speaking eastern region of the subcontinent into West Bengal and East Pakistan, already divided along religious lines by 1947, displaced millions of Hindus and Muslims from their homes and livelihoods over the next few decades. Even though communal riots in Bengal were less frequent than those in the Punjab-Pakistan region, the Partition left behind a legacy of communal violence and a "refugee crisis" that continues to this day.

From a scientific and humanistic perspective, communal violence is utterly incomprehensible because it is utterly irrational—whatever the impetus, all reason fails when a

mob reaches a point of no return and leaves death and destruction at its wake. In *Manu Dwadosh*, even though the reader is *not* shown the inner workings of the inter-clan war initiated by the Kafram, its fires and drumbeats loom large in the background, closely following the fleeing protagonists of the narrative. The impetus, however, is as clearly stated as it is illogical— one of the Kafram women have supposedly been abducted and this means war till the other clans are destroyed or the woman found, dead or alive. The Kafram, as a commune, disavows the will of its old and wise Chief-Mother, choosing war over peace; they will punish anyone who dare challenge them at any cost, even the annihilation of humankind. As befitting a fictional work, the stakes are higher than in any real-world situation encountered so far; but that only serves to emphasize the irrationality and futility of communal violence. By thus estranging the reader from a context-specific experience, the narrative lets us “restructure our experience of our own *present*” (Jameson, “Progress versus Utopia”, 151) and reflect on larger moral and philosophical issues.

Taken together, therefore, this cluster of novums and the moral questions that it raises, makes *Manu Dwadosh* unique not only within Bangla SF writing but also among post-apocalyptic dystopias worldwide.

History and Myth in *Manu Dwadosh*

All of Mitra’s kalpabigyan narratives show a marked preoccupation with history-making, whether it is an imagined past that has no documented evidence of having ever happened (Ghana-da and his ancestors) or the discovery of a haven untouched by radiation based on past records (*Manu Dwadosh*). A good majority of kalpabigyan narratives from the 19th and 20th centuries also share a similar preoccupation with history, historiography and the reconstitution of

a pre-colonial past, as does the more mainstream and critically accepted canon of Bangla literature, most notably the historical novels by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838-94). Even in this literary context, *Manu Dwadosh* is exceptional in that it employs at least three ways in which one can make sense of the past, and therefore the present, without directly privileging any one of these modes of understanding. In this section, I analyze a few excerpts from the novel to see how mythic, conventional/scientific and lived history, work in this narrative, and how this might be pertinent to its estrangement effect.

The foreword

The dystopic novel begins with the following foreword:

According to our Puranas, four hundred thirty two million (human) years consist of one day of the Creator Brahma. Equally long is one night. Brahma's day is the flourishing and stability of all Creation; His night marks its dissolution. One day of Brahma is one human *kalpa*. One *kalpa* is divided into fourteen *manu*. Our present time is the seventh *manu*, over which Baibaswata presides.

The narrative of this book is not an account of humanity's infancy in some distant past, but an apprehensive and astonishing, inferential and imaginative trajectory of the prolonged stream of present human history— its unwinding time shrouded in mist, arriving at the horizon of a distant future.

This tale is imagined in the duration of the twelfth *manu*, presided over by Rudrasabarni. Twelfth Manu is thus this chronicle's title. (407)⁴

⁴ The passage as translated in *Bengali Literature: Fiction* by Enakshi Chatterjee is as follows:

According to old Hindu tradition, 4.3 billion years on earth constitute a day in the heavenly calendar of the creator *Brahma*. His nights are of equal length. He brings the creation into being in the day, and annihilates it in the following night. Each single day of Brahma is termed a *Kalpa*. A *Kalpa* has fourteen smaller divisions, each unit being a *Manu*. At present we are supposed to be under *Baibaswata*, the reigning god of the seventh *Manu*.

This book does not attempt to chronicle the early stages of human history. This is a story of the future. It is not a prediction but an anxious look ahead with awe and wonder, towards the destiny towards which human civilization seems to be headed.

The following story is set in the twelfth Manu, when the presiding god would be *Rudra Sabarni*.(81)

Not only is this translation somewhat clumsy and awkwardly phrased (“towards the destiny towards which”), it incorporates numerous explanatory clauses and words absent in the original, does not attempt to transmit the elevated diction, and propagates outright misidentification (the Manus are not “gods”). These tendencies continue in the main text, with the clan name “Kafam” being inexplicably translated as “Negram”.

Mitra's immediate readers, ie. middle and upper-class Bengali (mostly Hindu) readers would have likely had no trouble in comprehending this reference to the Puranic time-scheme. The implicit reference to the transmigration/reincarnation of the *atman* (soul) would also not likely be lost on them: "the prolonged stream of present human history... at the horizon of a distant future" would thus indicate continuity, not rupture, between the events of our time in the seventh *manu* and the events in a far future world during the twelfth *manu*. According to the Puranic cosmogony, each of the *manu* durations or *mānavantaras* are separated by a *saṃdhi* period during which earth is submerged under water and all life ceases; after this period, the next *Manu* gives birth to mankind afresh while the *atman* is simultaneously reincarnated (Anderson 72-73). By thus framing it within what most Hindus would understand as a mythic history, the foreword might have offered its immediate readers a transcendental frame of reference to offset the dystopic world of the narrative proper and the open-ended denouement of the plot, not to mention the fraught history of colonization and independence.

With more contemporary readers in the Indian subcontinent and international readers who do not study Hindu philosophy, this invocation is more likely to produce an estrangement effect than not. "*Our Puranas*" (emphasis mine) immediately specifies a probable field or context of production that might appear to be archaic and unbecoming a futuristic narrative. Even then, it performs two important functions. Firstly, this opening suggests to the reader an alternative to the sense of history obtainable in and derived from the "west". For Mitra, engagement with this history, with colonization and its aftermath, is a project in itself, as seen in the Ghana-da series and the stories of Ghana-da ancestors set in the pre- and-early colonial period. Instead, a cosmogony such as the one proposed in the Foreword could deal, somewhat freely, with extremely long spans of time and make it manageable to our otherwise limited human

consciousness of temporality. The extended duration itself provides a different perspective on today's events that we consider being of great significance, but are insignificant dots on a long line—approaching a deep history of time and species-thinking, concerns particularly congenial to SF.

Secondly, the foreword foregrounds the question of the politics and process of translation. In my own practice, I agree with Spivak that it is *not* the task of the translator to render to a “sort of with-in translate so that the literature by a woman in Palestine begins to resemble, in the feel of its prose, something by a man in Taiwan” (400). The reader too must make the effort to grasp “(t)he history of the language, the history of the author's moment, the history of the language-in-and-as-translation” (403). For instance, the only complete English translation of the text opens with “According to old Hindu tradition” versus the more literal “According to our Puranas” of the original (81; see footnote 4). Going by the earlier translation, “we”/“us” are entirely disassociated from what follows and may lay no claim to it. Moreover, the “Puranas” are but a small fraction of the broad corpus of “the old Hindu tradition”, a construct of Orientalism carrying entirely different connotations for Hindu and non-Hindu readers. By attempting to make the text more accessible to a wider body of readers, the earlier translation homogenizes the context and overall makes it nearly impossible to draw out these inherent implications.

As for the process of translation, it is indeed challenging to render the highly elevated and Sanskritised diction of the novel to a similarly appropriate diction in English; in my translations, I have attempted to retain the lyricism of the original while conforming as closely as possible to both sentence structure and suggestive resonances of individual words. This perhaps creates a translation that challenges the Anglophone reader on linguistic and semantic levels, which, in any case, is congenial to SF as a genre even when originally written in English. My own task as

a translator, then, is to bring these dissonances to light and by distancing readers from their normal expectations from English prose, perhaps also broaden this horizon.

Conventional/scientific history, Mythic history and Lived/practical history

Within the narrative proper, tension between three ways of making sense of the past—the scientific or historic past, the mythic past, and the lived/practical past—reemphasize the importance of history-making and let the reader apprehend the storyworld, leading the narrative to its climactic denouement⁵.

Duru, the self-styled historian and his two students, Aajib and Nandak, who have abandoned their Eusov clan to investigate the history of their world, are closest in terms of both methodology and semantics to what according to the philosopher and historian Michael J. Okeshott would be a “scientific” or “historical” past: “constructed by professional investigators...a past inferred from the various kinds of evidence available to a given group of investigators in a given time and place” (White 249; Okeshott 9-10). Duru arrives at both a history of the human race and a solution for its future deliverance through a scientific investigation of the past, by collecting and translating scraps of ancient scrolls and stone carvings.

⁵ As discussed in the Introduction, these three different ways of making sense of the past also exhibit what Kuhn calls taxonomic incommensurability. Incompatible lexicons are used by the historian Duru, the Chief-Mother of the Kafram clan and Nasha and Luna to make sense of the apocalypses and their consequences such as the radioactive sores (*gamma gha*) which have made women infertile. It is, to some extent, true that this incommensurability between lexicons and thought styles is the basis of their misunderstanding and communal war, but other factors also play a part, as I discuss above. Their lexicons also differ significantly from the vocabulary that western technoscientific SF uses for the same things. A telling example is the disjuncture between “sage” (*rishi* or *taposh*) and “scientist”, where the former is, presumably, trained in both spiritual and material practices, while the latter only in material sciences, echoing the dialectical tension between *gyan* and *bigyan* in the formation of *kalpabigyan*, as Chattopadhyay proposes. The estranged lexicon also points to a rupture between our present time in the seventh Manu cycle and the far-future world of *Manu Dwadosh* during the twelfth Manu cycle, with the condition of possibility of an altogether different kind of scientificity.

Duru's inductive logic, reminiscent of the tenets of biological classification, hinges on the argument that just as someone who has spent his entire life in a forest is able to determine the nature of a tree from a withered leaf, these scraps similarly allow him to form an image of the past (432). In the fifth chapter of the novel, his exposition privileging the heliocentric model over the geocentric one offers, with a mix of conjecture and speculation, an astonishing narrative of how such a world came to be, which I quote briefly:

Many aeons past, when instead of Marichi of this age, Pulaha or Pulastya shone brightest in the northern sky, humankind reached the pinnacle of its maturity. Human lifespan was then not only greater than some three-decades, youth itself lasted over two two-decades. The sages of that great epoch however deviated from their true nature. They attained the unattainable by privileging power over welfare, yet that very success became the source of human society's ruin. The sages sought to debase even the sun and through their astonishing experiments created numerous Children of the Sun on this earth. Though created by man, these Children of the Sun rejected his sovereignty and departed to other worlds, leaving a scalded and devastated earth in their wake. As historical evidence indicates, this apocalypse occurred not once but many times, and each time, humankind declined in number, trickling down at last to these three clans which were forced to migrate continually. The protracted eradication of humankind was another curse incurred by debasing the sun. This curse contaminated the water, soil and air of the entire planet ... Thus childbirth became sporadic over successive generations... That our three different clans, traversing the planet in search of relatively secure and blight-free areas, have gathered here is proof enough that the remaining world is presently unpopulated. Even in this final sanctuary the curse remained, and the number of births has continued to dwindle to nothing. (433)

This exposition neatly sums up the major novums of the narrative. Terms like "Children of the Sun" (*Surjo-shabok*) or "debasement of the Sun" (*Surjo-tacchillyo*) are neologisms in Bangla. While Surajit Dasgupta contends that these "Children of the Sun" are nuclear bombs possessing the power of the sun, they can also be envisioned as robots or androids (83). Both can potentially reject mankind's "sovereignty" and depart to "other worlds", literally *pitrilok* or the realm of fathers, a temporary spirit world after death. Concepts like "sages" deviating from their "true nature" or "*swadharma*" (a particularly charged concept in Hindu philosophy) also call for a more science-fictional interpretation.

That the narrative *chooses* not to use more common substitutes in Bangla or borrowed English words (both readily available in the 1960's Bangla lexicon) for “nuclear”, “radiation” “robot”/ “android”, “scientist” or “space-flight” estranges this history further from a contemporary sensibility and points to the scientific theories of the ancient sun-worshipping Vedic civilization. For instance, Marichi, Pulaha and Pulastya are *Prajapatis* or mind-born sons of Brahma and stars in the Great Bear constellation are named after them (Wilkins 363). Usage of these proper names, however, do not necessitate that the entire weight of the Hindu cosmology from the Foreword, including its implicit reference to transmigration of the *atman*, is automatically brought to bear on the beliefs of the characters in this storyworld. Just as today most of the Anglophone world uses Greco-Roman nomenclature for stars and constellations (such as Andromeda or Venus) without believing in or even knowing Greco-Roman cosmology, the characters in this storyworld use these names as mere markers or symbols, signifying no philosophical or religious import beyond the name itself. The clans have no defined religions and no narratives of the afterlife; if they did indeed believe in the transmigration of the *atman* or immortal soul, the denouement would lose its entire climactic impact. In the Hindu concept of cyclic creation and destruction, it would be of little consequence if the first healthy baby born in 15 years, the only ray of hope in an otherwise bleak world, were lost. Instead, usage of this particular nomenclature in this estranged storyworld is perhaps better read as the vestiges of a lost language from a civilization of humans long gone, which the characters in the far future world can only grasp in fragments.

This is also “a past...that existed only in the minds of and books written by historians....being a construction of historians, has no substance at all” (White 249) . Duru and his students are isolated from the larger community which only derides them. While their

scientific investigations are channeled to search for a safe haven from radiation and perhaps the remnants of another civilization in the hidden depths of the fabled stygian caverns, they have no means or motivation to disseminate the knowledge they have gathered. In fact, it would be detrimental to their own existence if they did so, as the Kafram were out for blood, and the only other group similarly seeking refuge, ie. the parents and the newborn, had already found the caves without their guidance.

In contrast, the Chief-mother of the Kafram clan subscribes to a different way of making sense of the past: the mythological. By virtue of her position at the top of the social hierarchy of the Kafram clan, she is privy to secrets passed on from generation to generation of chiefs and in the wisdom of her years, attempts to stop the war. Speaking at the Fifth Great Convention that she convenes when war becomes imminent, she begins by tracing a history of the Kafram from Venus, “Daughter of the Sun” and “the brightest star in the firmament”, who descended to Earth many ages ago to stop the bloodshed between the fair and dark races. Venus bade the two races to come together in the First Great Convention, and became the first Chief-Mother of the Kafram. Thereafter, they proceeded to the pinnacle of their glory, acquired command over the four elements, conquered space and created the sun from a speck of dust. The Kafram were also in competition with other groups, and despite their mutual efforts at peace, one of the “sun-bursting” or “*surjo-sphuran*” experiments (another neologism) accidentally went beyond permissible limits, bringing disaster to the world. The rest of her speech describes the events leading up to the three other Great Conventions and the policies that were adopted in each of them. According to her, the practice of capturing men from other clans, adopted at the Fourth Convention when she was but a young girl, has been the sole cause of conflict and bloodshed in recent years. She

makes one last appeal to her commune to abandon war and live out its dwindling years in peace, but fails utterly when the Kafram refuse to obey her (438-441).

By tracing an unbroken legacy from a goddess who appears in the Roman pantheon, the Chief-Mother offers a different version of mythic history than found in the Foreword, appealing to a cosmology that is substantially unlike that of the ancient Vedic civilization. Duru's reconstitution of history is more universal, presenting, as it does, a version of the history of the entire human civilization based on a reconstitution of history following the scientific method, while the Chief-Mother's version is limited to the "rise and fall" of her specific clan. Her narrative also underscores the idea that something as ingrained as racial conflict can only be settled by a supra-natural means like divine intervention. These two narratives however share a moral universe wherein unbridled power can only lead to disastrous consequences. Reliance on oral-mythic history perhaps makes the Chief-Mother's narrative suspect to the contemporary reader; within the storyworld of *Manu Dwadosh*, however, it is as legitimate a way of making sense of the past as Duru's more scientific attempts.

But history itself comes to naught as the majority of people in this storyworld abide by what Okeshott calls a "practical past", "the mélange of memories, information, snippets of knowledge about our own and our community's past, that we all carry around with us and refer to or draw upon for aid in solving everyday problems in all sorts of domains of practical life" (White 249; Okeshott 15-18). For instance, after failing to capture the man she was hunting, Nasha, the fair and beautiful warrior we encounter in the first chapter, quarrels with her dark-skinned companion Luna on the ways of the world. While Luna would like to remain optimistic, Nasha refuses even to consider that humans had once inhabited the entire Earth, that men and women lived in pairs instead of communes where many women shared a few men, or that

gamma-sores were not a mark of pride but of affliction (411). In the collective memory of the clan that-which-happened-before-the-series-of-apocalypses is of no significance; the very possibility of learning from past mistakes or never repeating them become redundant. It is this overt reliance on the past-as-experienced, especially regarding social norms, that causes the last great war amongst the already depleted remnants of humankind.

Thus, it seems to me that if this text is a comment on the fallibility of collective human memory, it is also an ironic comment on the failure of the historian as an actor of any significance. To the reader, however, it underscores the significance of history or history-making as a critical and necessary exercise that is potentially a solution or means of deliverance.

Aesthetic Relish and *Manu Dwadosh*

Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* (ca. 200 BC-200AD) and Abhinavagupta's commentary on it (*Abhinavabhāratī*, ca. 1000) are arguably the most central texts of the *rasa-dhvani* (emotive suggestion) theory which, as outlined in the Introduction, has informed a long tradition of poetic and dramatic literature in the Indian subcontinent⁶. The eight *rasas* (emotive-aesthetic states/aesthetic relish) and their corresponding *bhāvas* (latent permanent states) enumerated by Bharata have a formal, almost typological organization, which makes them suitable as a framework for literary analysis in a wide variety of contexts. Admittedly, there is very little

⁶ Theorization on *rasa* in Sanskrit declined with the decline of Sanskrit as the court language and the rise of the vernaculars in medieval India. In Bengal, *rasa* theorization was also almost exclusively limited to religious tropes since the advent of Vaishnavism in the 16th century and its importance as an aesthetic framework declined with the impact of colonialism and introduction of new ways of making sense of the world (Patnaik 9-10). Specifically in the context of Bengal, the five *bhakti* (devotional) *rasas* propounded by Vaishnavism lack the concision of Bharata's typology and being non-secular, do not have as wide a scope.

recognition of prose forms in this tradition; however, commentators agree that context-appropriate description of actions or situations in prose is capable of evoking the intended emotional response in the reader (Chari 251-2). Contemporary criticism in English on the Sanskrit tradition argues that the rasa theory can, indeed, provide a valid literary-aesthetic framework for reading texts originating not only in India but also the “west”, and as a mode of inquiry is not at all obsolete in today’s world (Chari 247-248; Patnaik 1-4). As a postcolonial critic straddling both worlds, such a move is also a product of the times we inhabit. My own approach borrows from this underlying argument, and in this next section I analyze the specific workings of the emotive states pertinent to SF in general, and *Manu Dwadosh* in particular.

The Nine Rasas

Verse 31 of the *Rasādhyāya* or sixth chapter of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* compares rasa evocation to the savoring of well-prepared food by a gourmet, a sort of aesthetic relish:

(It is called rasa) because it can be savored...as gourmets (*sumanas*) are able to savor the flavour of food prepared with many spices....so sensitive spectators (*sumanas*) savor the primary emotions suggested by the acting out of the various *bhāvas*. (Masson and Patwardhan 1: 47)

Even though the number of rasas listed in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is controversial, scholars agree that the ninth or *śānta* (peaceful) rasa is a later addition. The eight rasas enumerated in the *Rasādhyāya* are erotic (*śṛṅgāra*), comic (*hāsyā*), compassionate/pathetic (*karuṇā*), furious (*raudra*), heroic (*vīra*), terrifying (*bhayānaka*), disgusting (*bībhatsa*) and awesome/wonderful (*adbhuta*). Each of these arise from their latent permanent states (*sthāyibhāvas*) and have their own (sometimes overlapping) sets of *anubhāvas* (causes), *vivbhāvas* (results/responses), *vyabhicāribhāvas* (outward manifestations/ancillary states) and appropriate actions through which they may be performed. (Masson and Patwardhan 1: 46).

The erotic, comic, heroic and awesome are concordant rasas, while the remaining four are discordant. A text can have a combination of rasas, but that does not produce a new compound or a “cocktail of emotions”; the stronger element always asserts itself and the text in totality has a single dominant emotion. When combined without respect to propriety (ie. combinations atypical to Sanskrit poetry), the discordant usually trumps the concordant (Chari 68). While *adbhuta* (awesome/wonderful) is the dominant rasa in *Manu Dwadosh*, *bhayānaka* (terrifying), *raudra* (furious) and *vīra* (heroic) rasas also figure as counterpoints; while the first two are suppressed, the latter is underscored in the actions of Buban, the ‘hero-figure’ of the narrative.

***Adbhuta* (Wonderful) Rasa**

The latent permanent state of any speculative fiction correlates most closely to *vismaya* or amazement; the corresponding rasa that the reader/audience experiences on its successful presentation is *adbhuta* or wonder. Bharata says little about *adbhuta* rasa and within the tradition, it has been largely neglected, along with *bībhatsa* (disgusting) and *bhayānaka* (terrifying), but as Patnaik argues, the latter have become the most explored rasas in modern literature (175).

Adbhuta is a positive response to a stimulus that involves the extraordinary and is not a part of the regular order of things. Some of its more estranging causes are “seeing heavenly beings”, “a flying chariot”, “a magic show” or “a juggler’s show” (Masson and Patwardhan 1: 56); the last two indicate a material mechanism that is not supra-natural. Other *vivbhāvas* or causes of *adbhuta* rasa from “two traditional Arya stanzas” are “any speech that contains an unusual idea, any unusual work of art (*śilpa*) or any remarkable act (*karmarūpa*)” (Masson and Patwardhan 1: 56). The emphasis here is also on the materiality of the unusual; a speech, an artwork or an action is usually created/performed by humans without using supra-natural means.

In this context, Abhinavagupta has the following note: “*mantradravyavastu yuktyādinā asambhavadvastupradarśanam*”, ie “the wondrous subject/plot is shown by incantations, material objects, wealth, artifice/magic, etc.” (Masson and Patwardhan 2: 93; Kavi and Shastri 169). In particular, *dravya* and *vastu* are terms commonly associated with chemistry and the material sciences, and the aspect of “non-existent/ impossible things” (*asambhav vastu*) also seems to be congenial to SF if interpreted in terms of new technologies and gadgets.

Evidently, these descriptions do not distinguish between divine prowess, magic or science, but there is certainly an implication that the rasa of wonder may legitimately arise from material means as well as from supernatural ones. Narrowing the scope of *adbhuta* rasa and linking it to the effect of cognitive estrangement, then, it may be postulated that in an SF text it is manifested in the novum, with one important distinction. As rasa evocation is a result of appropriate suggestion, *how* the novum is presented becomes crucial. Referring to the earlier discussion on the novums in *Manu Dwadosh* and Duru’s exposition, while a statement such as “(t)he world has been reduced to its present state by a series of nuclear apocalypses” works as a novum, it is Duru’s evocative description thereof that makes rasa possible.

The reader/audience must also be at a certain distance from the actions/revelations, because if she were capable of the same actions/revelations, it would no longer generate a sense of wonder; for instance, one juggler watching another perform the same old tricks (Patnaik 207). By that dint, it may be postulated that *adbhuta* rasa is also most prone to becoming lackluster on repetition or rereading; once the reader/audience figures out how the trick works, or in the case of SF, how the novums function, it is likely that it would no longer evoke a sustained emotive response. This is perhaps why much speculative fiction, along with detective stories and thrillers, fall into a one-time-read category. Thus, to be repeatedly appreciated not only by

readers in the immediate context of production but also other readers in other times and places, the *adbhuta* rasa dominant text needs to incorporate ancillary emotive states, whether concordant or discordant.

***Bhayānaka* (Terrifying) and *Raudra* (Furious) Rasas**

Verses 40-41 of the *Rasādhyāya* states:

The result (*karma*) of the furious should be known to be an aesthetic experience of compassion... The result of the heroic (rasa) is known as the awesome and the sight of the disgusting (gives rise to) the terrifying. (Masson and Patwardhan 1: 48)

In *Manu Dwadosh*, while the *vīra-adbhuta* (heroic-wonderful) connection is explored, albeit not in the traditional mould, *raudra* (furious) and *bhayānaka* (terrifying) are suggested and suppressed, without leading to/ arising from *karuṇa* (compassion) and *bībhatsa* (disgusting), respectively. Instead, these two rasas seem to create an atmosphere of mystery and fear pervading the storyworld of the text.

For instance, the novel opens with a strong suggestion of *bhayānaka*:

The *forest* is nearly impenetrable... Vines-leaves-trunks-roots-tendrils fuse in a *death trap*... The marsh reflects the *reddish sky* of twilight as it penetrates the dense forest foliage. As if *pale blood* from the forest-body had dripped and dripped, collecting there. (Emphasis mine, 409)

“Going to a forest” is explicitly listed as one of the causes of the terrifying or *bhayānaka* rasa, which arises from the latent permanent state of fear (*bhaya*). “Pale blood”, “death trap” and “reddish sky” also suggest mystery and fear; however, since that relationship is metaphorical the description does not suggest the related emotive response of *bībhatsa* (disgusting), which it would have on the sight of real blood. Rather, it indicates an *anticipatory* fear of the unknown (Patnaik 176-79). This sets the scene for the two Kafram women attempting to capture a man,

transitioning to a much more concrete fear, which is appropriately expressed in the latter's actions. "Fleeing in haste" and "look[ing] behind his shoulder"; he "plant[s] his feet in the mud and resist[s] the brutal force" once the noose tightens around him as he is "dragged helplessly...like a baited fish". The narrator pauses here to reveal the wonderful images of the two women. Finally, the man is able to escape by slipping his crude dagger under the noose and breaking away with all his strength, expressing heroic action. After his escape the two women discuss the world between themselves, and again suggest *adbhuta* rasa (409-411). The emotive ambience in this chapter thus moves from terrifying – wonderful— heroic — wonderful; the terrifying is similarly subsumed under the heroic or the wonderful rasas in other sections of the text.

As for *raudra* or furious rasa which has for its latent permanent state anger or *krodha*, Bharata attributes it to "demons, monsters and violent men". Some of its causes are "insult", "harsh words" and "envy" (Masson and Patwardhan 1: 53). All these causes are suggested towards the end of the Chief-Mother's plea for peace which the other Kafram women clearly misinterpret. Displaying actions appropriate to the acting out of the furious rasa, like loud roars and war-cries, brandishing of spears and shining weapons, they bellow in one voice "Death to the criminal! We Kaframs leave no enemies alive!" (441). However, the development of this emotion is undermined in the abrupt shift to Duru and his companions in the next chapter; indeed, nowhere in the text do we encounter detailed descriptions associated with the effects of *raudra*, like dead or dismembered bodies and destroyed property, which could potentially have given rise to *karuṇa* (compassion) or *bībhatsa* (disgusting) depending on treatment.

As to why these rasas are undermined in *Manu Dwadosh* and indeed, in a great deal of kalpabigyan, two reasons may be conjectured. Firstly, as discordant rasas overpower the

concordant ones, if the furious, compassionate, disgusting or terrifying rasas were to become dominant, the emotive effect of wonder would be nullified and the resultant text would have a completely different flavour than that associated with the positive affect of *adbhuta* rasa (Chari 68). Secondly, there may be retention of dramatic norms that dictate that excessive representation of death and bloodshed (on stage) is not desirable, and this aesthetic is also shared by a good majority of mainstream colonial and postcolonial literature in India.

***Vīra* (Heroic) Rasa**

As mentioned earlier, *adbhuta* rasa is a consequence of the action of *vīra* (heroic)—heroic actions of the protagonists are capable of evoking wonder in his friends (and dread in his enemies). Even though this wonder is usually *not* the specific aesthetic enjoyment derived from SF, which resides in the novum and is more a component of the world than the plot, the presence of strong protagonists is as central to SF as it is for other genres. More often than not, characters become heroes by the very dint of their excellence in negotiating with the dominant novums. In Bengal, dismantling the “passive” image of the “east” by presenting self-aware, active protagonists remained a distinctive feature even after political independence (Chattopadhyay, “Aliens”). Postcolonial *kalpabigyan* is peculiar in this regard with three long-running, hero-dominant series featuring Ghanada, Professor Shanku and Professor Nat Boltu Chakra, who are also intrinsically connected to the evocation of *adbhuta* rasa in their respective storyworlds, as I have analyzed in previous chapters.

In *Manu Dwadosh*, however, the connection between the heroic and the wonderful is explored differently, as the only identifiable hero-figure of this narrative, Buban, is neither directly connected to the novums nor plays any considerable part in determining the fate of this

world. Introduced in the very first chapter as the man who the two Kafram women were attempting to capture, his actions, ruminations and conversations with other characters occupy a significant part of the narrative. He displays both the causes and responses of *vīra* rasa as described in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (Masson and Patwardhan 1: 54). For instance, his recognition that he is the only huntsman motivated and skilled enough to evade the Kafram horde and continue his search exhibits the quality of “correct perception”; his “decisiveness and political wisdom” is evident when he realizes that he has to abandon Duru, Aajib and Nandak to their own fate for the greater good. As for responses, “patience” and “shrewdness” are also abundantly displayed in his actions; for instance, when he stakes out his prey, Niki (the mother of the miraculous baby), from a dense treetop, keeping silent and absolutely still for three whole days, even ignoring a luscious deer in his sights lest he reveal his presence (445).

However, Buban’s sole narrative purpose seems to be uniting the episodic plot, which could have been achieved quite easily without him, given the presence of a third-person narrator. Despite his heroic actions, he does not accomplish a single significant plot function—he cannot stop the Kafram mob, plays no part in finding a safe haven for the others, does not father the baby and lags behind when it comes to interrogate the person who abducts the baby. Neither is the reader invited, to any great extent, to empathise with his trials and tribulations.

The reader then cannot help but wonder why Buban is such a central character in this text, and it is perhaps only the connection between the heroic and the wonderful rasas that can provide a tentative explanation. However, even though the heroic rasa itself is highlighted in the novel to accentuate the emotive effect of *adbhuta* or wonder, the character of Buban does not make the cut and remains a failed hero. This can be read, perhaps, as a parallel to the movement we have seen with history earlier; in suppressing the functional roles of the historian and the conventional

hero, the narrative ironically underscores the importance of both history and heroism in this particularly bleak world, and by extension perhaps, in our own times as well.

Finally, the climactic denouement

If history-making and heroic action in *Manu Dwadosh* have as their goal the continuation of humankind, then the denouement marks an emotionally and philosophically charged opposition to this goal. Early in the novel, we are introduced to the mad-philosopher Sharva, who makes everyone uncomfortable by asking questions on the validity and meaning of existence, and spreading discord in the minds of the few who speak to him. His belief that mankind, with its ingrained attraction towards chaos and destruction, does not merit continuation in this world and should hence become extinct points to a popular understanding of “survival of the fittest” with a twist; here, it is mankind that is clearly unsuitable for survival (431). Instead, he strives for immobility, an escape from the repetitive motions of existence in an already dying society, and practices what he preaches by stationing himself on a rock for days on end, refusing to go anywhere or help anyone.

Even though Sharva is shunned and pitied by all, his words and actions initially seem to be geared towards enlightening the rigid, convention-bound mindset of his clan. His heated conversations with Paraj perhaps prompts the latter to break all rules and elope with Niki; the result of that union is the only surviving baby in more than fifteen years. In the last three chapters of the novel, Duru, Aajib, Nandak, Paraj, Niki and Buban have congregated in the stygian caves, finally hopeful of the fate of humanity and willing to do anything for the survival of the baby. However, in a moment of inattention, the baby goes missing! Unexpectedly, Sharva

steps forward from the shadows, admitting that he is the culprit and refusing to disclose the location of the hidden baby:

“No Paraj! ” Sharva continues in a calm, composed manner, “I did not steal the child in order to return it. I stole it so that not even a faint stream of our history may reach the future. In that dull, semi-conscious lump of flesh you call a child, you see a ray of hope for humanity’s future. Have you ever considered what that hope is? If the child lives, it will grow up, become a person. To become a person is to be ravaged by the doubts and desires of the body and mind; to build clans for a secure and untroubled existence, yet remain enchained by society’s rules to a life of unrelenting pain or a living death; to seek the meaning of existence, and confounded by a lack of answers, fill up this world with one or many gods in mindless adulation. Even if that one child becomes the progenitor of many, the newer mores, norms and beliefs will be nothing but colourful facades over the greed, envy, pride and depravity of his naked monstrosity. He will worship war, not peace, and driven by his lustful arrogance, will again seek the sun-spores; afflicted again by the sun’s curse, he will tread again the path of destruction. Escape from this vicious cycle lies in its motionless centre. May your child receive that immobility. May the stream of mankind be forever immersed in that immobility.” (455-456)

Sharva clearly bases his inferences on the notion that “history repeats itself”, a variation of what White characterizes as a mix-up or fallacy, to “discern a pattern in history justificatory of a particular group's sense of its destiny (or) identity” which does not admit to alternatives (White 250). His intensely life-negating belief and corresponding action stands in direct opposition to the efforts of the other characters and privileges an escape from the misery of this vicious life-cycle by surrendering to the “immobility...(of the) motionless center”—the state of ceasing to exist, of death and extinction. With no defined religions and no contesting narratives of what happens after death, it is not surprising that such a viewpoint is espoused by one of the anomalous characters within this fictional world itself. More so, as Sharva has been repeatedly referred to as “mad” or a “lunatic”, it is possible that his “calm, composed manner” arises from insanity and is not necessarily a realization of anything other than a void of nothingness that he interprets the past and future of human existence to be. In terms of *śānta* or peaceful rasa, too,

while Sharva's actions and words suggest the cause of *vairāgya* or detachment arising from state of disillusionment, it does not completely arrive at a realization of "the Truth" that gives rise to quietude (Patnaik 228).

It is perhaps fitting, then, that Sharva achieves his desired immobility in death as Buban stabs him in the heart and steps over his still-smiling corpse to seek out the hidden baby (456). In conjunction with "[i]t is as if the boundless future cries out in a child's voice from the depths of the stygian cavern", the novel remains open-ended with the question "[w]ill [the child] ever be found?" (456). By juxtaposing a position that denies the very necessity of human existence with a denouement that begs anticipatory speculation, the narrative leaves the reader with an anxious hope, and evokes a sense of wonder for the very last time.

Conclusion

Manu Dwadosh invites rereading and reevaluation of past readings and is undoubtedly one of the best examples of postcolonial SF that I have encountered. While the novum remains a central concept in reading kalpabigyan, context-specific adjustments need also be made to unlock the full potential of texts like *Manu Dwadosh*. The two core concerns of this novel are history-making and heroism, both of which are treated ironically by separating the action from the actor. Duru, the Chief-Mother and Buban's failure to have any significant impact on the fate of the storyworld negates the idea that history is made by heroes and kings, while underscoring the processes or narratives through which history and the hero-figure are constructed. The introduction of Hindu cosmology and conception of time also adds imaginative depth and situates the text in its immediate context of production. And finally, Sharva's deeply pessimistic

approach towards human life compels the reader to rethink deep-seated assumptions of time, existence, history and the future.

In the next (and last) chapter, I analyze a set of texts that are, in their mood, diametrically opposed to the bleak ambience of *Manu Dwadosh*, but continue to address some of the same issues as discussed in this and previous chapters in an entertaining and humorous way.

Utopias and Dystopias

CHAPTER V

OF GHOSTS AND ALIENS: SHIRSHENDU MUKHOPADHYAY'S EUTOPIAS

Sirshendu Mukhopadhyay and Bangla literature

Sirshendu Mukhopadhyay (1935-) is a prolific and extremely popular author of Bangla mainstream and genre fiction. His family migrated to India from Maymansingh (presently in Bangladesh) just prior to WWII when he was a young boy and he has travelled extensively within India and abroad¹. His experiences with both urban and rural/sub-urban settings from both sides of the border are represented in his novels for adults like *Ghoonpoka* (*Woodworm*, 1967) *Jao Pakhi* (*Go, Bird*, 1976), *Manabjamin* (*Human Terrain*, 1988), detective Shobor novels like *Rwin* (*Debt*, 1995), and SF like *3002* (1968) and *Bonodebi o Panchti Payra* (*The Forest Goddess and Five Pigeons*, 2015). His short stories and novellas for younger readers have also contributed significantly to the oeuvre of *kishor sahitya* or children-and-adult literature in Bangla. These span a wide range between Goyenda (detective) Barodacharan, sports (“Boxer Ratan”), travel stories, ghost-and-horror stories, fictionalized anecdotes of rural life, fantasy and SF.

He has edited the literary periodicals *Desh* and *Anandabajar Patrika* from the Ananda publication empire, and has received several prestigious literary awards like the Vidyasagar Puraskar and the Sahitya Akademi award. Among the authors considered here, his work has seen

¹ His visit to the US are documented in the fictionalized autobiography *Bangaler Amerika Dorshon* (1998).

the largest number of translations to English and transformations into graphic novel/comics medium, while over a dozen of his genre texts have been adapted to film and television, like the horror story “*Goynar Baksho*” (“Jewel Chest”, 2013) and *Ebar Shobor* (2015, based on the detective novel *Rwin*)².

Selected texts and publication details

From Mukhopadhyay’s vast repertoire, I have chosen to focus on four novellas from his *adbhutuṛe* series. *Adbhutuṛe*, a portmanteau of “*adbhut*” (strange/weird) and “*bhutuṛe*” (ghostly/concerning ghosts) is coined as a series by Ananda publishers, and includes the 40-odd texts since “*Manoj’der Adbhut Bari*” (“The strange house of Manoj and his family”) in 1977 to the most recent “*Jung Bahadur Singh’er Nati*” (“Jung Bahadur Singh’s Grandson”) in 2017. These first appear in the Pujabarshiki annual of the children-and-young-adult periodical *Anandamela*, and are then reprinted as standalone hardcover volumes the next year, usually prior to the Kolkata Book Fair in January (Niyogi; “Anandamela”). This practice, however, is far from typical, and Mukhopadhyay is the only author who has been able to sustain it over four decades.

These petite hardcover volumes (18 x 12 x 1.5 cm, 100-130 pages including full-page illustrations) run into several reprints. For instance, apart from the thousands of *Anandamela* Pujabarshiki copies (not including pirated copies on the Internet), “*Bhutuṛe Ghoṛi*” (“Ghostly Wristwatch”), between its 1st edition in 1984 to 6th edition in 2004, sold an impressive 14700 copies, and is currently in its 2014 edition (Front matter 6th edition). Priced at Rs 100-120 each³, a hefty sum in a relatively stagnant Bangla publishing market since the late 1990’s, sales figures

² For additional details, see *Tomorrow, I promise* vii-xiv; *Rahasya Samagra* and *Goyenda Barodacharan*.

³ Compare to volume I of his *Kishor Upanyas Samagra* (22.4 x 15 x 3.4 cm, 664 pages) which is priced at a mere Rs. 400 and contains 10 of these novelettes. Ananda Publisher’s books are usually more expensive than the competition, featuring good quality binding and paper, along with cover art and full-page illustrations by notable graphic artists like Debashish Deb.

alone attest to the great popularity enjoyed by the series. Ananda has also recently compiled the *adbhuture* series in four volumes under their *Kishor Upanyas Samagra* compendium rubric⁴ (*Collected Children-and-young-adult Novels*, 2013-2014).

While serialized for purely marketing and publication purposes and not sharing characters, ancestry/lineages or locations, these novellas are similar in their narrative worldbuilding/ storyworld. They are all set in idyllic sub-urban storyworlds that may be characterized as Mukhopadhyay's own brand of postcolonial eutopia, though plots and character-types have become somewhat formulaic over the last four decades. While discussing the *adbhuture* series, Chattopadhyay argues, "the simplicity in [Mukhopadhyay's] works is a deceptive cover for presenting contemporary social complexity [and] may be recognized as the best Bangla kalpabigyan...at present" ("Bengal"). Santanu Niyogi, taking the formulaic worldbuilding in account, however takes a more critical stance, and postulates that one of the significant reasons for the continuing success of this series is its evocation of nostalgia in adult readers, who have some experience of visiting or living in rural spaces and have grown up reading the series since 1977. Niyogi also discusses the impact of gift economy on *kishor sahitya*, and conjectures that contemporary children are likely to find these as estranging as foreign fantasy such as the Harry Potter books. Since the late 1990's, technology boom and population explosion have altered the Bengal landscape so much so that contemporary children, especially those whose parents are able to afford these pricier books, have little or no experience of idyllic rural or sub-urban spaces, nor do they, arguably, have much interest in Bangla fiction, being acclimated within a quickly expanding "English-medium", cosmopolitan education. As I have

⁴ Such author-focused compendiums are very common in the Bangla publishing industry. This is especially true of genre fiction and *kishor sahitya*; though more mainstream works are also collected in a similar rubric. For instance, Sunil Gangopadhyay's detective Kakababu series is published as a *samagra* or compendium in seven volumes, as are compendiums of his other mainstream novels.

discussed in the Introduction, *kishor sahitya*, especially by canonized authors, has enjoyed an adult readership, and this series is no exception. In terms of generic expectations from *kishor sahitya*, this series shares with the Ghana-da, Shonku and Nat Boltu series an eschewal of romantic-sexual liaisons and excessive gory detail.

However, in contrast with the three earlier series, the great majority of the narratives in the *adbhuture* series contain no significant scientific or technological elements, and I have chosen four from the few which engage directly with the science-superstition dichotomy: *Bhuture Ghoṛi* (Ghostly Wristwatch, 1983) and its loose sequel *Golmaal* (Ruckus, 1988), *Patalghor* (Underground Chamber, 1995) and *Aghorgunj er Ghoralo Byapar* (The Labyrinthine Chain of Events in Aghorgunj, 2007; henceforth *Aghorgunj*).

Chapter Summary

This chapter has three sections. In the first section, I focus on “**Worldbuilding Strategies**” by analyzing the storyworld of the texts in three concentric circles (three subsections): “central characteristics”, “peripheral characteristics” and the “entrance of the stranger”, where the last disrupts the balanced co-existence of the two earlier rings. Characteristics marked central or peripheral pertain to both ideologies and landscapes, and I argue that the setting of these narratives present an alternative way of imagining the small-town or *mufassil* (while drawing on verisimilar models and liberally using currently circulating stereotypes), in that they are self-encapsulated and almost totally exclude any direct critique of contemporary Bengali society. The central characters, too, while comfortably aligned to *mufassil* domesticity, are simultaneously marginalized within it due to age, characteristic eccentricities,

unemployment, and for some, bachelordom. These characteristics make them more attuned to peripheral elements, such as haunted houses, lunatics or thieves or the unemployed lower-classes. The combined effect of the coexistence is a tolerance and acceptance of the other, and a eutopic vision for the body-politic, where the community must band together to save themselves while the institutions of governmentality fail to deliver.

In the second section “**Of Ghosts, Scientists and Aliens: Superstition and Science**”, I discuss a few types of exceptional strangers or outsiders who initially disrupt, yet ultimately empower the body politic— the figure of the (absent) scientist, humans possessing special powers such as prophecy and being unlucky, real and fake ghosts and aliens. Indeed, one of the more striking characteristic elements of the *adbhuture* series is the equal ontological status given to ghosts, humans and aliens. Operating on the science-superstition dichotomy, I argue that the texts affect a reversal in previously held belief-systems (of the characters), while the “truth” is often revealed only to a few characters and the reader; and that comic-ironic interpenetration of superstition and science reveals how both are open to interrogation.

Then, in the third and final section, “**Hāsyā and adbhuta: Structural Affinities**”, I explore how the vision of this eutopic world is predicated on “joy” and utilizes the second mode of *adbhuta*, absent in the other series/ novels discussed in this dissertation. I then provide a translated excerpt from the chronologically first novella, *Bhuture Ghoṛi*, and analyze how reversal of faith is affected by both the comic (*hāsyā rasa*) and the wonderful (*adbhuta rasa*) through the intervention of alien technology.

Worldbuilding Strategies

About two-thirds to three quarters of the narratives focus on worldbuilding and characterization, and a very large part of that occurs in dialogues between characters, limiting much direct narration. Novum-events, which rupture the everyday, are usually clustered at the end, reminiscent of Bharata's description that a story should be like a cow's tail, bushy and full of surprises at the end (*The Number of Rasas* 203). For purposes of analysis, I consider the storyworld to be a series of concentric rings or circles, radiating from a central hub, to "peripheral characteristics", and finally to the "entrance of the stranger", which ruptures the fine balance between the central and peripheral. This operates on levels of both spatial configuration and ideology. Geographical boundaries of the narrative locations are rarely transgressed, and even though the reader is made aware that there are other contiguous townships, villages and cities, their specific differences aren't discussed. Furthermore, the events and characters occupying the central hub, i.e. the core manners, practices, customs and ideologies pertaining to characters that are most often in narratorial focus are possible even without the two outer rings, as seen in other novellas in this series. For instance, a good number of the other novellas in the series do not have the "entrance of a stranger", or even any speculative elements.

Storyworld: Central characteristics

In terms of spatial location, I argue that these encapsulated, fictional storyworlds are based on the template of sub-urban Bengal townships (the *muffassil*), rather than the "village", as do Chattopadhyay, Niyogi and Chilka Ghosh. The word most commonly used to indicate this sort of township in the narratives is "gunj"; sized, populated and culturally acclimated somewhere between the village and the city: "*adha-shohor adha-graam*". Gunj also carries the

connotation of some business activity and local markets, and the four specific narrative locations are generally stable economically, and not on any marked decline or rise. As a suffix to place names, (other examples being “-pur”, “-haat”, “-garh” or “-guri”⁵) “gunj” is also pre-colonial nomenclature and carries, perhaps, some nostalgic connotations in fictional iterations mentioned in the narratives, like Nandapur, Hatarashgarh and Aghorgunj. Though the places are also occasionally called “*graam*” (“village”) and “*shohor*” (“city”), the narratives do not describe features common to either of these broad categories. No practicing farmers or artisans appear in the stories, nor is there any scenic description of paddy fields or agricultural activity nearby. The bustle, pace of living, pollution, congested roads, transitory population etc. characterizing post-Independence cities like Kolkata are also notably missing. Circumscribing the storyworld within a specific geographic area runs counter to all three series previously discussed: Ghana-da, Shonku and Nat Boltu all leave their homes to (ad)venture into the outside world, and maintain profitable and/or intellectually satisfying connections with people beyond their immediate social circle.

These townships are also frozen in a tiny window of near-past time roughly between the 50’s and 60’s, and is largely verisimilar to *muffassil* Hindu middle-class lifestyles: joint families with unemployed and/or unmarried members living in sprawling houses, simple lives and a leisurely pace of living, school-district championships in cricket and so on. The narrative time is distinctly post-Independence; in *Bhuture Ghoṛi*, we hear of Gordon Sahib, the sole elderly white man (amateur scientist) in town, who had stayed behind after Independence (42). No British or other foreigners are present in the three other stories; instead, the colonial legacy appears to have been relegated to the dusty pages of history, along with its crumbling and overgrown mansions at

⁵ For a map of the region in 1781 by James Rennell’s work as Surveyor General of the East India Company, where all these pre-colonial place names are suffixed, see “A Bengal atlas”.

the edge of town. Modern amenities like transportation (trains, bus, motorbikes), electricity and refrigerators are present, though notably absent are the telephone and the television, not to mention the internet, even in post-1990 texts.

Indeed, in comparison to verisimilar realities from which much of the worldbuilding directly draws, this encapsulated storyworld is marked as much by what it excludes. No direct mention of the “outside world” or the changing realities in Bengal as a result of either national-level policymaking or broader forces of globalization occur in this insulated space. There is no directly articulated response to broadly colonial or postcolonial ideologies of the kind made familiar by the other texts considered here, except in their almost total exclusion. Neither does this storyworld posit any possible or achievable future (in the sense of utopia) or attempt any reclamation of a pristine, pre-colonial past (in the sense of alternate or secret history). Also noticeable in their near-total absence are the “social evils” besetting the postcolonial Bengali *muffassil*, and any self-reflexive critique of Bengali middle-class *muffasil* culture is subtle at best. Non-Hindu religious or other linguistic communities also receive no more than a token mention in the series, and none of these four stories have, for instance, any Muslim or non-Bengali characters; two groups which have been cause for much socio-cultural contention in Bengal since Independence. Even shorn of speculative elements, this storyworld is, right from the beginning, estranged, familiar yet unfamiliar, by the many exclusions and absences.

The small-town ethos of idealized, frozen-in-time *muffassil* middle-class Hindu domesticity is reflected in the practices of the central characters: they have ample time on their hands, everyone knows everyone else and one does not need to call ahead to visit a friend or neighbor. For instance, meetings between Haran-babu (usually referred to as *dadu*/ Latu’s grandfather) and Shyamacharan tantrik (also referred to as *Jatai-dadu*) in *Bhuture Ghoṛi* and

fortune-teller Joteshwar and doctor Karali in *Ahorgunj*, are as regular as day after night. They are friendly and considerate within the bounds of middle-class neighborliness: if Joteshwar drops in for tea every evening at Karalidaktar's house, he also makes sure to bring delicacies whenever they're prepared in his own home (*Ahorgunj* 26). These two pairs in particular also (humorously) illustrate the "opposites attract" axiom; despite regularly heated arguments on their opposed beliefs on science and superstition, they cannot spend even a day without arguing, and grow anxious if the routine is broken. Arguing for its own sake ie. the "argumentative Bengali" trope, is personified also in *Patalghor's* Dwijapada Bhattacharjee, whose sole occupation is to strike up arguments on any random issue with whomever he meets. Such is his proficiency that he can prove and disprove any issue in succession. The townspeople, well aware of his habits, have learned to agree with whatever he says no matter how self-contradictory his statements may be. The culture of *adda* or intellectually stimulating conversations which subvert the capitalist work ethic, as seen previously in the Ghana-da series, permeates this exchange of ideas without necessarily convincing the opposing faction of the superiority of the other's opinion.

Subversion of the capitalist work ethic is also present in the tolerant, if not outright amicable glorification of harmless eccentricity and a penchant for hobbies which mark the adult characters of all four novellas. In *Bhuture Ghorī*, Haran-babu habitually loses his wristwatches, three hundred twenty two and counting, before he receives the ghostly wristwatch. He has three sons, the eldest of whom is Latu's father, who works in Kolkata and appears briefly to gift the wristwatch to Haran-babu. His two other sons, who are described more fully and set off minor events, are unemployed bachelors; one is an amateur photographer and the other a recent graduate, and neither of them are particularly accomplished. In the loose sequel *Golmaal*, Hori-babu, while holding some kind of an office job, is an underappreciated and unpublished poet,

usually oblivious to his surroundings. He often forgets to eat or sleep when the poetic mood strikes him, mistaking an UFO as a duck-egg-shaped moon or dreaming of eating cloud-popsicles if he had a flying jacket like the one made by his scientist father. Of his three brothers, one is a police officer posted in a different town (mentioned only twice), one an amateur classical musician and the last an amateur wrestler terrified of real fighting. While they are quite passionate about their interests/hobbies, all three of them are terrible at it. Unemployment and bachelordom also seem to go hand-in-hand, and while Latu's uncles are relatively young and might possibly marry in the future, Hori-babu's brothers Nyara and Jori-babu are old and confirmed bachelors. These characterizations draw humorously from Mukhopadhyay's own childhood experiences with his grandfather, parents and uncles in the 1930's. However, the intra-familial disputes/misunderstandings between members, in some cases boiling over into full-fledged rage as witnessed by Mukhopadhyay, remain outside the ambit of middle-class domesticity in these novellas (see Mukhopadhyay's autobiography *Ujaan [High Tide]*).

Of the central characters, only Subuddhi from *Patalghor* is not markedly eccentric, though he deviates from the stereotypical image of the "frail and effeminate" middle-class Bengali male in having served in the military (see Sinha, M., *Colonial Masculinity*). All four narratives have at least one minor character who subtly challenges that old colonial idea about Bengali men by practicing "physical cultures", which "received an unprecedented impetus during the nationalist phase in Indian history"⁶. For example, in *Golmaal* we meet a minor

⁶ From the "Physical Cultures of Bengal" project description:

It is well-known that various genres of physical cultures received an unprecedented impetus during the nationalist phase in Indian history, dating from roughly the end of the 19th century till the third decade of the 20th. During this time, a kind of muscular nationalism gained ground in Bengal. Fed up of being stigmatized as a "frail and effeminate" race, Bengalis—both men and women—began to participate in various kinds of physical cultures, ranging from martial arts to gymnastics, trapeze acts to hot-air ballooning, wrestling to body-building. ... there were plenty of accounts in the contemporary periodical press about the new forms of bodily activity.

character, Binodbihari High School's "Game-Sir" (PT instructor) who nonchalantly wrote "Pathan Singh" instead of his given name Pallab while filling up the forms for his matriculation examination⁷, because "he was intensely attracted to bravery from a young age [and] knew that the Pathan were a race of bravehearts" (33). This disrespectful and daring act is, over time, accepted by the local populace. The renaming is paradoxical in itself, as the Pathans or Pashtuns are primarily Sunni Muslims, and Singh is a Hindu or Sikh last name. In terms of the core ideologies of the central characters, on the one hand, this indicates a broad and humanist acceptance of the "other"/ "Stranger" figure that marks these narratives generally (discussed in the subsection on "peripheral characteristics" and in "Of Ghosts, Scientists and Aliens" sections) and on the other hand, indicates a relative fluidity of identity construction beyond mainstream Indian-Hindu nationalism, which would not be as easily accepting of any such hybrid⁸.

This act of renaming, associating the quality of "bravery" to the Bengali identity, also indicates a subtle sense of nostalgic Bengali patriotism⁹ that permeates the core ideologies of the central characters. As seen in previous chapters, the relationship between mainstream Indian nationalism and kalpabigyan remains fraught with contradictions: Ghana-da and Nat Boltu

⁷ Within this fictional world as well as in Bengal, the name and date of birth recorded on one's matriculation examination (10th grade) transcripts are considered proof of identity, and one has to obtain a legal affidavit if one wishes to change one's name after that: so this was the best way Pallab could make the "Pathan Singh" permanent. The government-issued birth certificate as proof of identity was much less prevalent in early decades after independence, and many "refugees" from East Pakistan/ Bangladesh and poorer, rural people did not/ do not have birth certificates. For official purposes in contemporary India, such as obtaining a voter identification card or a passport, either document is acceptable.

⁸ For an analysis of Hindu-Hindi nationalism and "effeminate" Bengali masculinity today, see Sur, "Garbha Sanskar".

⁹ After the formation of Bangladesh in 1971, Bengalis in India could hardly call for a Bengali nation or a linguistic nationalism. I use patriotism here in the sense of an attachment to the (here, linguistic) homeland, which is perhaps the best Indian Bengalis can aspire to now. Since Independence, West Bengal state governments have been accusing the center at Delhi for unequal distribution of resources, irrespective of what political party was at the center. However, politically at least, Bengal has not claimed a cultural nationalism on the basis of local practices or language, but the sidelining of the Bengali intellectual in the national sphere continues to rankle with the contemporary Bengali middle-class. This gets somewhat more complicated when religion is introduced around the question whether Muslim Bengalis are "true" Bengalis or not. See "Shibashis Chatterjee "Regionalism in West Bengal"; Goswami, "Sahibs, Babus, and Baniyas" and Kabita Chakraborty *Young Muslim Women*.

subscribe to their regional “Bengali” identity (though for different reasons) while Shonku identifies himself as “Indian”. Here, the narratives are marked by a mostly unarticulated and nostalgic attachment to the Bengali homeland—unarticulated, because no direct statements pertaining to Bengali patriotism can be found there, no character is especially proud of being Bengali (in the sense that Nat Boltu or Ghana-da are) and neither is Hindu-Bengaliness posited as being better in any way than belonging to other religious or linguistic communities. However, Bengali patriotism works by *omission* here, in both the encapsulated geographical demarcations of these townships based on the Bengal *mufassils* and the near-total absence of representation of any other religious groups (most notably Muslims) or linguistic communities (most notably Biharis and Marwaris). As the only values represented are those professed by the average middle-class Bengali *mufassil* culture, Bengali patriotism here does not call for a programmatic articulation, as seen in the Ghana-da or Nat Boltu series.

A face of religious nationalism may, however, be discerned in the characterization of Jatai tantrik in *Bhuture Ghoṛi*, who espouses religious masculinity, abstinence and detachment from material/earthly concerns, and is a caricature of the rebel *sannyasi* (Hindu ascetic) figure enshrined in Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay’s *Anandamath* (1882). However, while Bengali patriotism and moral values such as respect, kindness, and acceptance of difference are central to this storyworld, both religious nationalism and scientific materialism, the two poles around which anti-colonial discourse was constructed by the likes of Tagore and Gandhi, are decimated in the treatment meted to their representatives (Chattopadhyay, “Kalpavigyan and Imperial Technoscience”). Jatai’s tantric prowess in the taming of ghosts, and Gordon’s scientific prowess in the construction of gadgets, are both revealed to be faulty, if not outright fraudulent. And when they overstep their bounds and attempt to pry open Kaji (ie. Doer, the ghostly

wristwatch alien AI), they are punished with being temporarily conditioned to speak and understand only Kaji's alien language, appearing insane to the other townspeople.

All the central characters in these four novellas are older, if not elderly, with Subuddhi in *Patalghor*, the youngest, in his 50's. Living to a ripe old age and retaining youthful vigor, especially in mental faculties, physical strength and bravery is a recurring trope in the overall series. For instance, in *Patalghor* we also meet the 98-year-old braveheart Samaj Mittir who loves to dip his moustache while drinking milk, walks 3 miles every morning and doesn't hesitate to explore a haunted house. But age, along with their characteristic eccentricities, also demarcates for these central characters a marginal position within the ambit of typical Bengali middle-class domesticity. Old men are rarely didactic ideologues here. This characterization is opposed not only to representations of the powerful patriarch figure (for instance, as seen in Satyajit Ray's film adaptation of *Devi*) but also characters like Ghana-da, Shonku and Nat Boltu, who don't have familial obligations. Though these characters occupy a central space within the narratives, they are simultaneously marginalized within their immediate social spheres, especially as they are rarely taken seriously, least of all by their wives.

Women, such as Haran-babu's wife, Basabnalini-thakuma (grandmother) in *Bhuture Ghoṛi*, and Sunaini Debi, Hori-babu's wife in *Golmaal*, rule the domestic sphere with an iron fist. Not only do they manage the running of large households with many relatives and domestic servants, but their word is final in any sort of dispute, ranging from domestic to economic to political issues to codes of *bhodro* (genteel) conduct. Practical, astute, intelligent and not given to fancy like their spouses, they are also sometimes quarrelsome, though in keeping with the

overall atmosphere, never willfully unkind or cruel¹⁰. In *Aghorgunj*, Karalidaktar's wife Surabala is depicted somewhat differently in that she is not quite as dominating as Basabnalini and Sunaini, but eccentric in her superstitious paranoia about inauspicious portents like cat's cries or owl's hoots. These eccentricities help balance her husband's virulent atheism. By middle-class patriarchal standards, they aren't model wives, but all of them are extremely maternal, and quite content within their domestic bounds. The broader suggestion appears to be that women need not sacrifice their femininity/feminine roles in order to negotiate with patriarchy and as seen in Mukhopadhyay's other SF, women's maternal instincts/ concern about the domestic sphere is not necessarily a drawback or opposed to having successful careers¹¹. There are no female characters who go out to work, for instance, and in this idyllic, throwback world this fits well.

Simultaneously enmeshed in domesticity and marginalized within it, the older men are matched by their children, grandchildren or nephews on the other end of the age spectrum. At age 15 and younger, Latu in *Bhuture Ghorī*, Ghorī and Angti in *Golmaal* and Kartik in *Patalghor* (to a lesser extent) take center-stage in the unfolding of the "novum-events" (as discussed in Chapter III). While the ideological or formal categories of "colonial childhood" in Satadru Sen's

¹⁰ These characteristics will find immediate resonance in both empowered and negative representations of women in *kishor sahitya*, especially Leela Majumdar's oeuvre in general and her unforgettable Podi Pishi (from *Podi Pishi's Burmese Box*) in particular, who was so fearless that she chased robbers with her fish-chopper. Negative depictions often relate to women's quarrelsomeness contributing to the plight of the "stroino" or henpecked husband figure, the butt of much Bangla mainstream comic fiction/satire, or who, (like Mukhopadhyay's own uncle) are supposedly "spineless" and "emasculated" for caring about their wives over the patriarchal social order (see Mukhopadhyay's fictionalized autobiography *Ujaan*).

¹¹ In Mukhopadhyay's futuristic stories for young readers such as *Bhuter Bhubishyot (The Past's Future)*, Basabnalini Devi channels advanced technology of her own invention for mundane domestic matters as making *nadu* (sweet grated coconut and jaggery balls), keeping track of her numerous grandchildren or sun-drying *bori* (lentil cakes) in the upper atmosphere (*Goyenda Barodacharan*, 177-186). In Mukhopadhyay's futuristic SF for adults, like *Ishara* and *Bonobibi o Panchti Payra*, female characters are often central and struck by the same ennui that plagues the male characters of those dystopic worlds.

“juvenile periphery” argument or even Sibaji Bandyopadhyay’s “Gopal-Rakal dialectic”¹² argument may not be brought to bear directly on these texts, these representations of “postcolonial childhood” reemphasize core moral values along with a sort of street-smartness common to other children-and-young-adult characters in contemporary Bangla *kishor sahiyta* (C. Ghosh, “Mythologies of Childhood”). Ghorī and Angti in particular are thoroughly characterized; Ghorī, the older brother, is the calmer, more calculating planner, and Angti, the younger brother, follows his lead unquestioningly. This well-attuned understanding, along with a good grasp of martial arts, is instrumental in challenging situations like winning a cricket match, escaping surveillance by good alien Ramraha, or foiling the bad aliens’ plans. Latu in *Bhuture Ghorī*, younger and more impressionable, develops a warm relationship with the powerful alien AI in the wristwatch (Kaji, or Doer, a name it gives itself), and deceives the bad alien Khrutch Khrutch when he tries to acquire it. They are “innocent” only insofar as sexual encounters are concerned; in all other aspects, they display a canny grasp of circumstances, superseding the eccentric male adults and effectively taking matters into their own hands on behalf of their fathers/grandfathers. This however, does not budge the moral values of respect, kindness etc. that characterizes this storyworld. The marginalized eccentric adults, representing the past and the peripheral juveniles, representing the future, come together to save the present, whether it be from global apocalypse (in *Bhuture Ghorī* and *Golmaal*) or local catastrophe (*Patalghor* and *Aghorgunj*).

¹² As Sibaji Bandyopadhyay and Satadru Sen have shown, the colonial project called for the re-imagining of the figure of the “colonial child”, whether in accord with the concept of the “white child” or in opposition or subversion of that idea. This led to a proliferation of literature for children-and-young adults since the late nineteenth century, and this investment on part of the mainstream intelligentsia is also perhaps responsible for the richness of Bangla *kishor sahiyta* today. Bandyopadhyay discusses the “Gopal-Rakhal dialectic” in terms of the good boy-vs-bad boy dichotomy and how the Gopals or good boys appear in fiction in the guises of the Rakhals or the bad boys and vice versa. Sen similarly demarcates a “juvenile periphery” in the representation of child-characters in colonial Bangla fiction within four overlapping modes. However, neither of them consider, at any great length, works commonly marketed as *kishor sahiyta* where the protagonists are *not* children.

These characterizations both reinvent commonly circulating stereotypes and pit these eccentric traits against the “normal”, carving out a space for those who do not conform to Bengali *mufassil* middle-class manners and expectations. These eccentricities also make these characters more attuned to speculative elements when they appear, and more accepting of strangers in general.

Storyworld: Peripheral characteristics

In this section, I explore characteristics that are peripheral to this storyworld, both in terms of geographical location and ideology; this constitutes the second of three concentric circles or rings within which I analyze this storyworld.

Two features of the peripheral spatial configuration immediately stand out: crumbling and overgrown colonial buildings, and the ubiquitous *samsan* (cremation grounds). These peripheral locations are generally avoided by the local populace as being haunted and snake-infested, lending an eerie quality to the narratives when characters are forced to go there. Some of the buildings belonged to the colonial *zamindars* (landlords) and some to British sahibs of the indigo plantations, but they are long buried in the dusty pages of history, along with any prosperity or prominence in the present narrative time. *Guptodhon* (hidden treasure), the search for which has fuelled many a thriller and detective story in Bangla fiction, recurs in association with dilapidated buildings on the edge of town, usually flanked by a water body (weed-infested, stagnant lake/ pond). Though no treasure (in gold and jewels) is found in there, in the bowels of dilapidated and no longer “capital producing” colonial buildings, *something of value* resides. Paradoxically, these treasures point to the future, not the past—in *Patalghor*, Subuddhi finds advanced alien technology and a cryogenically frozen man in the basement lab, and in *Golmaal*,

the “key and riddle” lead to the discovery of a Golden Sphere which is humanity’s last resort against alien world-kidnappers. While such overgrown, dilapidated houses were a common sight in the Bengal *mufassil* on which this storyworld is based, with the population boom and rising land prices all over Bengal since the 1990’s, these sites have mostly been razed and the ponds/lakes filled for apartment buildings. The presence of these anachronistic spatial elements on the fictional landscapes again point to the peculiarly frozen-in-time-and-space nature of these storyworlds.

The second peripheral landscape, the *samsan*, has similar associations/connotations as graveyards, though a very different eschatology; for one, there is no possibility of bodily resurrection (ie. vampires or zombies) as Hindu corpses are cremated. *Samsans* are usually located on the riverside and the landscape of a desolate, barren stretch of land on the otherwise fertile banks of the Gangetic plains stands out visually in contrast with agricultural greenery or populated shipyards. Dotted with smoldering *chitas* (wood pyres), they engender a feeling of “*samsan-bairagya*”¹³ or detachment that comes with the realization of the ephemerality of life and permanence of death. At night, especially, they are also fearsome places, believed to be home to several varieties of ghosts. In Bangla fiction and contemporary social reality alike, *tantriks* who supposedly practice grotesque rituals with corpses and congregations of “undesirable social elements” like goons and drunkards, are to be spotted in *samsans*, and “normal”, middle-class people generally avoid going there unless they absolutely must.

Characters peripheral to *mufassil* middle-class domesticity also appear in these narratives. In *Bhuturē Ghōri*, we see the Shakta tantrik Jotai and the Vaishnava Nitya Das debating at length

¹³ *Bairagya* (or *vairagya* in Sanskrit) is similar to the transitory state *nirveda* mentioned by Bharata, but we do not see that explored here to any degree.

on whose god is the mightiest, Kali or Krishna, in a comic social commentary on these two predominant Hindu sects in Bengal. In *Golmaal*, we meet Panchananda, a smooth-talking opportunist and teller of tall tales, who manages to insert and endear himself to poet Hori-babu's household on the ruse that he was a companion of the latter's father, Shibu-babu. He tells many tales of Shibu-babu's fantastic inventions, and the literary influence of Ghana-da is evident in his descriptions of how he saves Shibu-babu from numerous crises. He is finally revealed to be a detective chasing another outsider, Gajo *paloan* (strongman), a criminal in disguise who teaches wrestling, fighting with sticks and other martial arts to the youth in town (which serves as another instance of "muscular" Bengali identity-formation). Similarly in *Ahorgunj*, Bogolapoti is the resident ghost-taming *trantrik*, and Gopal Guchhayit, the local gang-leader and self-identified "Robin Hood". Then there is Bhootnath Nandy, a scientist buying up local "haunted houses" in search of the basement lab in *Patalghor*. While they are outsiders to middle-class domesticity and also technically strangers to the town, they are not only accepted by the large-hearted townspeople and their families, but also accorded respect (grudging or otherwise). This reemphasizes the values of tolerance and inclusion that is a central characteristic of this series.

Here, and in other stories in the series, we see that same acceptance accorded to various "social undesirables" like madmen, beggars and thieves. Madmen are reluctantly respected for their prophetic abilities and estranged view of reality: for instance, in *Ahorgunj*, Lalmohon is considered to be "*boka*" ("simple") and just a short step away from full-fledged madness, but the townspeople are indulgent of his "simple-mindedness". Once, inspired by a conversation on the ill-effects of "fatty bellies", he goes up to the local gang-leader Guchhayit and grabs his stomach, tickling him and setting off a laughing fit. "Normal" people fearing for their own lives wouldn't dare to do anything of the sort, but when he explains that a paunch will come in the way of

Guchhayit's profession, the latter is appreciative and promises to exercise (32). Many stories also focus on the practices of thieves, their heroics and the advantages of thieftodom. A stock scene in the series (though not in these four stories) is the local thief visiting a middle-class household to steal, and instead conversing with the (usually older male) householder on how hard times have become, before leaving peacefully. None of these outsiders and "social undesirables" are harmful and they help save the townspeople from crisis.

Acceptance of outsiders and a romanticized, blatant disregard for the "institutions of reason" characterizes this series overall, and this is also reflected in the portrayal of the police and the education system¹⁴. The *daroga* (colonial term for local police chief) in particular is often humorously described as obese, lazy, cowardly, taking foodstuffs from the local populace as bribes, and utterly disinterested in locking up thieves and robbers. For instance, in *Patalghor*, when the townspeople congregate to guard the basement lab from bad alien Vik, we find the *daroga* Horokanto Poddar sitting comfortably and fanning himself, telling tales of heroics past, as Subuddhi and Dwijapada wonder, "Horokanto has a huge physique, no doubt. But it's the result of eating much ghee, meat and fish. Who knows what will happen if he tries *fighting* with such a body!" (transliteration in the original italicized, 90). Of course, he dozes off before the bad alien arrives. Police infrastructure is also similarly ludicrous, with rusted guns and sub-par ammunition, and constables busy running errands for the *daroga* or providing personal services like head massages. In *Ahorgunj*, Monohar daroga pretends a headache and retires when rumors of an "*ugrobaadi*" ("terrorist") hiding in Karali-daktar's house reach him, and complains that his guns are no match for the terrorist's superior weapons. Instead of the police coming to the aid of the townspeople in times of crisis, the latter have to band together and take matters into their own

¹⁴ These four novellas don't comment extensively on the postcolonial education system; for an analysis, see D. Dey "The many faces of exile".

hands, leading to a romanticized portrayal of community where differences are not only accepted but also empower the body politic.

This vision of the community banding together is certainly eutopic both in the present postcolonial context and in instances of postcolonial Bangla fiction. Also notably peripheral (and usually absent) are any overt references to narrow-mindedness and gossipy nature the of *muffassil* middle-class, rampant misappropriation of resources and infrastructure, low-level government corruption¹⁵, poverty, lack of sanitation, poor educational policies, communal violence etc.; in short, all the “social evils” one finds in mainstream/realist Bangla fiction on the *muffassil* or small-town between Independence and present day¹⁶. Subtle criticism does occur occasionally, but they are usually directed elsewhere and do not articulate a call for social action or betterment. *Aghorgunj* (2007), the chronologically last text of this series considered here, is in fact exceptional in its social commentary than the other novellas considered here.

Aghorgunj opens with two lower-class characters, Shonkahoron and Bipodbhonjon. They are seen in idle and dejected conversation at the *samsan* by the Bidyadhari riverbank. Shonkahoron has lost his land to a moneylender, and Bipodbhonjon, a potter, finds his business in ruins. While the reasons behind their unfortunate lot are not elucidated, the reader can surmise this to be a direct result of neoliberalization (1991) and the opening of the global market, leading to farmer suicides and downfall of traditional artisans (A. Gupta, “Farming as a Speculative

¹⁵ The fictional police officers in these novellas are not corrupt in the sense that they are harmful or extort an enormous toll in cash or kind from the townspeople for great personal gain. They are generally well-meaning; it’s just that they can’t help being cowards, and extremely lazy. In the context, low-level government corruption is much more brutal and involves exchange of significant amounts of hard cash. For instance, the Kolkata Traffic police regularly takes cash bribes from long-distance lorries, and it’s quite usual to get a seized motorbike or bicycle released by paying a few hundred rupees extra, instead of taking the matter to court. There’s even the common saying that when the tiger touches you, you get 18 blows, but when the police touches you, you get 36 blows!

¹⁶ For contrast, see Leela Majumdar’s speculative fiction “Tong Ling” and “Holde Pakhir Palok”. While set in similar storyworlds with young protagonists, Majumdar does not hesitate to point out “social evils” like poverty, leading to many poignant moments.

Activity” 190). Not having enough money for food, the pair had gatecrashed a wedding feast, hoping that feeding two more mouths would be inconsequential in a feast of the scope. But were immediately recognized as “*utko lok*” or “unwanted men” and shooed out despite some gentle-minded folk who mildly suggested that they be allowed to stay. While gatecrashing weddings was common practice in past decades¹⁷, the rationale here appears to be more a classist and casteist resentment towards lower-class, lower-caste people. Shonkahoron and Bipodbhonjon however are not particularly perturbed by this treatment, and continue to discuss how their lot is a direct result of not getting an education, how reading makes one’s head heavy or how even running errands all year for the schoolmaster didn’t ensure a passing grade. Readers with any familiarity with Tagore’s idea of education, particularly the satire *Totakahini*, will find immediate resonances here. In less than two pages Mukhopadhyay lays out the social practices of the *muffassil* middle-class, which would be familiar, even nostalgic to older readers. However, the criticism remains subtle and unchanneled and soon thereafter they discover a corpse floating down the Bidyadhari river, setting off the novella’s chain of events.

They then discover that the corpse is actually a handsome, rich and *alive* young man, and go in search of Karali-daktar (doctor). Karali-daktar is simultaneously respected and feared by his patients: while he often treats poor patients gratis and is considered as a savior, his middle-class patients despise him for taking his treatment to extremes, like trying to strangle a diabetic patient who secretly ate sweets or almost assaulting a patient who insinuated that another doctor was much better than him. In his defense, Karali-daktar presents a pointed critique of other

¹⁷ Urban students hilariously gatecrashing wedding feasts, with the possibility being shooed out, was a common subplot in Bangla literature and film in the 50’s and 60’s, though here class appears to be a more important factor. Gatecrashing wedding feasts was once socially tolerated, but over the last few decades has become increasingly restricted at least in urban spaces, with an increasing wealth gap where lower-class people, immediately identifiable by dress, aren’t even allowed into posh wedding venues with fixed and checked invitee lists.

contemporary doctors with “private practice” and agreeable bedside manner: it’s not enough to prescribe tests and medicines, but the doctor should also care to ensure that instructions are followed correctly, by force if necessary. This moral imperative, while laudable, is at odds with the privatization of medical facilities in urban and sub-urban Bengal, where doctors with “private practice” in small towns are often more interested in evading taxes and improving their bottom-line than caring for the welfare of patients or affording cheaper healthcare to poorer patients. While the doctor himself is a central character in this text, this particular social critique is mentioned only once in the narrative, and while the moral imperative does inform his professional activities, it remains peripheral to the plot.

This self-encapsulated world where central and peripheral characteristics exist in relative harmony could *a priori* be called a “eutopia” or “good place”¹⁸. Suvin defines utopia as “the construction of a particular community where sociopolitical institutions, norms and relationships between people are organized according to a *radically different principle* than in the author’s community”, based on “estrangement arising out of an alternative historical hypothesis...by discontented social classes interested in otherness and change” and then proposes the “eutopia” where sociopolitical institutions “are organized according to a *radically more perfect principle*” (*Defined by a Hollow* 383-4). Tom Moylan’s “critical utopias” also “dwell on the conflict between the ordinary world and the utopian society opposed to it so that the process of social change is more directly articulated” (*Demand the Impossible*, 10-11). Bill Ashcroft, in his study on postcolonial utopianism, argues that utopianism (as distinct from utopia) “arises from an unrecognized but powerful reality: that successful resistance is transformative, and transformation rests on the belief in an achievable future” (4). Even in comparison to utopias

¹⁸ It is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide any adequate summation of the large body of criticism on the literary utopia and neither do I attempt to rework/extend available theories in the light of these texts.

from 19th century and earlier, this unified storyworld remains distinct in that the narratives are never given from the viewpoint of the outsider/stranger, common to plots where the “civilized”, usually white male protagonist, discovers a self-encapsulated “lost world”, which is only superficially more perfect than the protagonists’ own culture, and open to transformation with the protagonist in the lead. The closest “match” with these narratives is perhaps Suvin’s “fallible eutopia”, defined thus:

I. the society of textual action is eutopian, in open or subtle contradiction to the human relations and power structures in the writer’s reality;

II. this new Possible World is revealed as beset by dangers—centering on inner contradictions but often including also outer, hegemonic counter-revolutionary violence—that threaten to reinstate class stratification, violence and injustice;

III. our hero/ine, often a multifocal collective, combats this threat with some chance of success. (*Defined by a Hollow* 394)

The storyworld in these texts meets some of the above criteria but not others; there is, at least in my reading, no transformative charge or vision of future betterment. This storyworld starts and ends as a “eutopia”/ “good place”, with the novum-events satisfactorily wrapped up by the end of the narrative, and with no lingering discontent on part of the characters or revelation of any major fault-lines in the social order, which reverts to status quo. Neither is it strictly a future “Possible World”, as there are too many verisimilar anachronistic elements directly tying the storyworld to a specific spatiotemporal configuration, nor in the sense of “alternate history” or that which “could-not-have-happened”. But neither do these novellas devolve into pure nostalgia and uncritical escapism of a “past possible”.

As such, while the characters inhabit a rather pedestrian and humdrum world, these fictional spaces are envisioned as alternative to the “real” city, the “real” village *and* the “real” *muffassil*, idealizing an ethos that remains consistent over four decades of publication between

the 1977 “*Manoj’der Adbhut Bari*” (“The strange house of Manoj and his family”) and the 2017 “*Jung Bahadur Singh’er Nati*” (“Jung Bahadur Singh’s Grandson”). Set in postcolonial times, the narratives display few of the problems of postcoloniality and instead emphasize a mostly unproblematic idealization of universal humanism, neighborliness, charity, community, broad-mindedness etc., especially towards strangers who rupture the routine regularity of everyday life. Thus while readers in the 1970’s and 80’s could still find some nostalgic elements in this worldbuilding, certainly young readers after the turn of the century are likely to find it estranging, if not outright mythic, in the sense of a “small-town fairy tale”.

Storyworld: The entrance of the stranger

This self-enclosed “eutopia” is ruptured by the “entrance of the stranger”, representing the 3rd and furthest point away from the central characteristics. This feature is not uniformly present in all the narratives in the series, which is why it lies beyond the margins of this unified storyworld as a whole. Also, unlike the more-or-less peaceful and continued coexistence of the “central” and “peripheral” characters, ideologies and settings discussed earlier, the “stranger’s” role is essentially to rupture that fine balance, and reveal “inner contradictions” within the social order, most often on the axis of superstition versus science. Some of the “normal” human strangers are accepted as part of the township in due course, like Panchananda and Bhootnath Nandy, though they willingly exit once the novum-events have been resolved. Others, like the hired goons Chiru and Sachi, are defeated by the combined efforts of the townspeople and the local ghosts. In the next section, I explore the science-superstition dichotomy by focusing on some of these strangers, whether they are humans possessed of non-human/non-rational abilities, technological artifacts, aliens or ghosts.

Of Ghosts, Scientists and Aliens: Superstition and Science

The second most distinctive feature of these narratives, (after the self-encapsulated, frozen in time, familiar-yet-unfamiliar picture of the *mufassil*), is the equal ontological status given to ghosts, humans (with genius and/or supernatural abilities) and aliens, which I discuss in this section. While scientists and aliens are a staple in SF and validated by a progressive-futuristic-scientific imagination, the equal inclusion of ghosts and uncanny abilities in humans brings these narratives into a grey territory, especially when conventional understandings of “science” and “superstition” rupture from the inside. Chronologically, it appears that Mukhopadhyay’s earlier texts, *Bhuture Ghorī* and *Golmaal*, eschew mixing these two elements, but the later texts *Patalghor* and *Ahorgunj* are more experimental in mapping possible interactions.

The absent scientist

Kalpabigyan in general has two types of protagonists, the adventurer (Ghana-da, the Bimal-Kumar duo in Hemendrakumar Ray’s *ouvere*) and the scientist (Shonku, Nat Boltu, Md. Zafar Iqbal’s Shofdor Ali). In Mukhopadhyay’s narratives here, however, the central characters are accidental-heroes, who get embroiled in the novum-events usually by dint of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Scientists, while named, are either absent or dead, and play a minor role in the novum-events. There appears to be a conscious movement away from any verisimilar representation of the postcolonial scientific establishment and networks that characterize the three prior series, but the token inclusion of the scientist may be read as a tacit acknowledgement that scientific networks exist, along with making the storyworld more rounded and inclusive.

With the exception of *Ahorgunj*, all three novellas feature at least one scientist: Gordon in *Bhuture Ghoṛi*, Shibu-babu (poet Hori-babu's father), in *Golmaal* and Aghor Sen and Bhootnath Nandy in *Patalghor*. Shibu-babu is of the previous generation and long dead, as is Aghor Sen who lived 160 years ago. Gordon is mentioned, but we only hear him speak an alien language under the influence of the ghostly wristwatch alien AI Kaji. All of them are/were amateur scientists—the prevalence of amateur/non-professional characters marks a tendency towards a glorification of the anti-work ethic and an eccentric and romanticized worldview—and all of them have/had their own private laboratories, harking back to the 19th century model of scientific activity. For instance, Gordon's lab, where the final confrontation between Latu, the wristwatch AI Kaji and bad alien Khrutch Khrutch take place, is packed with unfinished gadgets like a robot which slaps its master, a flying motorbike that can't fly, and a storm-raising machine that doesn't work. Latu and Kaji fix these gadgets, but they are destroyed as so many toys when Khrutch Khrutch arrives and are no help in combating the superior technology of the alien overlord (*Bhuture Ghoṛi*). In *Golmaal*, we hear of Shibu-babu's many fantastic inventions like an invisibility potion, a flying jacket, a special solution that made the NASA rockets fly etc. But these are suspect, as they are described by the self-identified teller of tall-tales Panchananda, who only pretends to have known him and is a detective in disguise. Shibu-babu does invent and hide a golden sphere which becomes instrumental in saving the world, but remains unclear whether it was alien technology in the first place. They are brilliant but eccentric and ultimately their inventions are lost to history, as these remain in secret and never enter the broader scientific consensus, let alone any system of capitalist commodity production.

In *Patalghor*, we see a somewhat different configuration. Scientist Aghor Sen's basement lab owes its existence to alien technology, from the cryo-chamber imprisoning Sonaton

Biswas, to a mysterious reinvigorating solution and an oil-lamp that burns steadily like an electric bulb. The other scientist, Bhootnath Nandy, is an outsider to Nandapur, with his only significant contribution in the first two-thirds of the plot being the citation of an article on Aghor Sen printed in a British scientific journal. He is a representative of the more contemporary scientific establishment, and more aligned to the center-periphery model of scientific activity where non-Western scientific activity becomes validated only through representation in Western journals and via western scientific institutions. His initial redundancy¹⁹ is a not-so-subtle nod towards the ineffectuality of the contemporary Bengali (or even Indian) scientific establishment. Only after an encounter with Aghor Sen's ghost precipitating a reversal of faith does he become a catalyst in harnessing another superstitious power, Sonatan's unlucky ability.

Superstition: Humans with special abilities

Everyday rationality is challenged by Joteshwar jyotishi in *Ahorgunj*, Karalidaktar's friend and *adda*-partner, who fortune-tells as a hobby, and is respected as a "*bak-siddha purush*", a man whose spoken word will always come to pass. However, there is a catch: he is always wrong, unlike other fortune-tellers who are sometimes right and sometimes wrong. Whenever they encounter a significant life-juncture, the local populace relies on his forecasts which they reinterpret as it's opposite. For instance, when Ganeshbabu falls ill and the doctors have given up hope, he calls Joteshwar for a detailed reading of his astrological chart. Joteswar promises that he will get better, at which a wave of grief washes over the household. Ganeshbabu miserably requests Joteswar to check if he's missed some minor detail, and the latter obliges by spending

¹⁹ Interestingly, in the film adaption of *Patalghor* (Dir. Abhijit Chaudhuri 2003), Bhootnath occupies a much more central space and is instrumental in resolving the crisis instead of Sonatan's unlucky ability; the film removes the internal contradictions and ironies present in the novella and instead streamlines the narrative within expected horizons of scientific activity and SF alike.

many hours redoing his calculations, finally declaring that Ganeshbabu has no hope and will definitely die. Sure enough, he recovers completely. The stereotypical reliance of middle-class sub-urban Bengalis on astrology and it's (usually charlatan) practitioners is ironically reversed here; for one, that these charlatans should not be taken for their word is embedded in the very act of prophesy.

In *Patalghor*, we see a similar challenge to everyday rationality in the “*apoya*” or unlucky ability possessed by Gobinda Biswas and his cryogenically preserved and reinvigorated great-great-great grandfather, Sonaton Biswas. Anyone who sees them before noon is bound to have many accidents all day long; the effect, mercifully, passes after noon. This “unlucky ability” is so powerful that the townspeople fumble about with their eyes closed in front of Gobinda's house all morning. Sonaton Biswas is even more “gifted”; his own mother wouldn't see his face in the morning, and even cats and birds avoided his house. While both of them were ostracized, Gobinda Biswas utilizes a less rigid and increasingly commercial mindset of the locals to transform his abilities to a business opportunity. For instance, local shopkeepers deliver fresh food and groceries gratis to Gobinda Biswas's doorstep every morning, instead of him having to visit the market and pay. This agreement is mutually beneficial for all parties, as it helps them avoid a scenario where Gobinda's public appearance would make everyone run willy-nilly with their hands over their eyes, disrupting the market. Interestingly, it is this irrational ability that saves Nandapur from the bad alien Vik. This final sequence reemphasizes an equal playing field between two non-verisimilar elements on the two ends of the (“western”) science fiction-to-fantasy spectrum: only a supra-natural ability can defeat a supra-natural enemy, while all rational human effort falls flat.

Superstition: Ghosts— Real and Fake

In Bangla folklore, there is an extensive variety of both Hindu and Muslim ghosts. These are usually believed to be harmful, though helpful ghosts are certainly not unique to Mukhopadhyay's fiction and are found in other instances of mainstream Bangla literature as well as *kishor sahyā*²⁰. There is, at the outset, a worldview shared between the text and context where god and ghosts are inextricably linked. Though the Hindu pantheon has many gods, the concept of an abstract/formless singular god *Ishwar* (Sanskrit/Hindi *Ívara*), or *bhogoban* (Sanskrit/ Hindi *bhagavan*), who is the overseer of one's fate, has been around since the Puranas (Lochtefeld 94). In the worldview professed by the narrator and characters in this series, and in the social context especially when it comes to the not-so-scientific-minded rural or sub-urban populace, belief in *bhogoban* and *bhoot* (ghosts) go hand-in-hand: if one believes in god, one must also believe in ghosts and vice versa²¹. As for superstitions of the afterlife and specifically ghosts being linked to religious belief and/or ritual, a recurrent instance in the series, in Bangla literature generally and in contemporary society is the practice of chanting "Ram Ram" to ward off ghosts. While vampires, revenants, zombies, exorcism of humans possessed by demons/

²⁰ Rabindranath Tagore, influenced by folklore, was one of the first to write modern ghost stories in Bangla, such as "*Manihara*" ("Lost without (her) Jewels", 1898) and "*Kshudito Pashan*" ("The Hungry Stones", 1916).

²¹ Hinduism does not have a cohesively frightening view of sin or afterlife; there is no equivalent Devil or Satan figure and while the god of death, Yama, and his minions, the *yamdoot*, are often depicted as stern and frightening, they do not have control over one's *atman* for all eternity. So in this scheme of things, becoming a ghost directly comes in the way of doing time for one's sins in *naraka* and going to heaven and/or reincarnating. In that sense, ghosts, and the possibility of becoming a ghost, chained to linger in this mortal world eternally without relief (or at least till the end of one of Brahman's aeons), is perhaps as frightening as eternal suffering in Hell till the Last Judgment.

The concept of ghosts appears first in the later Puranas, and is not found in the Vedas or Upanishads. In popular Hindu belief, Shiva is also known as Bhootnath, or "lord of ghosts", and his follower, Nandi, is the king of ghosts. Bangla mainstream author Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay's (1898-1971) novella *Bhoot Puran* comments extensively on the *bhoot-bhogoban* relationship, and satirizes science and religion, (also democracy and genocide) in the process; so this in itself is not new in Mukhopadhyay's fiction. *Bhoot Puran* is however, a social satire, and not classifiable in the horror-or-weird genre, just because it's about ghosts-individuals and types. It ends with the startling assertion that just as humans die and become ghosts; ghosts die and become humans. These reborn ghosts are bent on taking revenge for ghost-genocide committed by modern society by being born as dictators who would ultimately turn the planet into a ghost planet.

ghosts and so on can be traced to their origins in Christian belief and ritual, these elements have quite comfortably been classified within “supernatural fantasy” or “horror” genres in the contemporary west. However, even leaving aside the colonial “superstitious native” trope, both fictional representations of and non-fictional reports on Indians, especially rural Indians, by contemporary Indian and non-Indian authors alike, report a belief in ghosts that is inextricably linked to a belief in religion²², quite apart from the fictional genres of “fantasy” or “horror-or-ghost” stories²³. This is why I have preferred to use the category of “superstition” here over “supernatural fantasy” in the context of ghosts here. The existence of god and ghosts alike is yet to be proved by science, but to the believer, *both of these are real*.

This worldview is held by most of the local populace in the novellas, and framing unexplainable events as the work of ghosts is more prevalent than considering other possibilities/explanations, including scientific or science-fictional ones²⁴. The local populace subscribing to this belief-system is depicted as gullible, relying on *tantriks* and *sadhus* with supernatural abilities. In *Bhuture Ghorī*, Jotai tantrik claims to have a pet ghost Banchharam. In *Aghorgunj*, the tantrick Bogolapoti claims to have tamed two *dehati*²⁵ ghosts Gaana and Bajaana. Both *tantriks* perform ordering these ghosts around in the presence of the local populace and are venerated by believers. In *Golmaal*, mysterious happenings at the swamp flanking the ruins of an old palace on the edge of town are believed to be the work of ghosts, and in *Patalghor*, a local

²² For instance, see Freed et. al. “Ghost illness in a North Indian village”.

Also see “Families flee Telangana village after ghost scare” and “Selfie with ghost: How a Telangana village got over its fear, thanks to rationalists”.

²³ As Mimi Mondol puts it succinctly in the context of western readers perceiving Hindu religious belief: “To think of other people’s actual faith as speculative fiction is a fairly heinous act of racism”. See “A Short History of South Asian Speculative Fiction: Part I”

²⁴ An oft-used example in *kishor sahitya* is the *aleya*, considered to be a ghostly light which leads people astray to their death, but scientifically explainable as spontaneous combustion of methane produced in swampy areas, leading to the optical illusion at night that the guiding-light is moving further away.

²⁵ Slang for migrants from north-Indian Hindi-speaking lower classes and castes.

contractor raises the market-price of dilapidated, crumbling houses on the claim that they are haunted. On the other hand, there are the “*nastik*”²⁶ or atheist characters do not believe in god or ghosts, like Haran-babu, Bhootnath Nandy and Mukunda Biswas. They treat the *tantiks* and fortune-tellers as charlatans, and are entirely dismissive of the belief-system shared by the majority.

Each of these cases challenge the very idea of belief itself, whether it is in science, in religion or in ghosts, each leading to a different sort of reversal of previously held beliefs on two diegetic levels: the characters’ revised belief and the “true” revelation to the reader, which may or may not be shared with the characters. This “true” nature is either aliens/alien artifacts or real ghosts.

In *Bhuture Ghoṛi*, Haran-babu’s atheist worldview is turned upside down with the ghostly watch’s whisperings and he succumbs to superstition by giving it to Jatai tantrik for an exorcism, who tells an imaginary story of the murder of the watch’s previous owner. Jatai and his competitor Nitya Das are however dumbfounded when they hear the same whispers. Among these three characters, only Jatai knows for certain that the ghostly whisperings are *not* his pet ghost’s work, since there is no “real” pet ghost. This precipitates reversal in all parties concerned: Haran-babu starts believing in ghosts and god, and Jatai and Niyta Das in the gods of the opposed Hindu sects, as I discuss in the third section of this essay. However, none of them get to the truth of the matter, that the wristwatch was a powerful alien AI (Kaji) transmitting signals. Only Latu, Haran-babu’s grandson, remains privy to that secret at the narrative’s close.

²⁶ From the Sanskrit *nastika*, to refer to those who do not believe in the Vedas; they may or may not believe in the concept of a formless god: Buddhism and Jainism are two *nastika* philosophical schools. In common parlance, *nastik* is usually translated as atheist, and in these and other examples of kalpabigyan, relates specifically to scientific atheism, creating a false (but extremely widespread) binary between religion and science.

Similarly, the mysterious ghostly apparitions in *Golmaal* are finally revealed to be machinations of bad aliens. When some of the abducted townspeople chant “Ram Ram” to ward off ghosts, their prayers are in vain because what they believe to be ghosts are actually aliens, and the prayers fruitful only insofar as it gives them courage.

Previously, in some of the Shonku and Nat Boltu stories we have seen how the scientist channels/manifests ghosts with the help of technology, to negate disbelievers or to free the world from alien rule; for instance, the ghost-condensing machine/entity Ishwar in the Nat Boltu story *Kalochhayar Koral Kahini* featuring the alien queen Dhumabati. Here, however, the opposite holds: scientist-ghosts warn humans against danger, and helpful ghosts exist independently and peacefully alongside humans, resolving novum-events. The common Bangla word for ghosts, *bhoot*, also means “the past”²⁷; it is derived from the Sanskrit root *bhu* or “to be”, and as a verb, implies the act of “appearing/arising” in Bangla. *Bhoot* is inflected with all these connotations in these narratives: ghosts, in their indubitable being-ness, stand in for the past in these narratives; reveling in an unchanging and continued afterlife of previously held ideologies and practices. Real ghosts receive much narrative space— *Bhuture Ghorī* has a two-page description on the nature of ghosts, their shape, size, where they live and what they eat and so on, which is presented as an alternative to more popular notions, such as the idea that people who die in accidents without fulfilling their desires attach themselves to objects. While they have “airy” bodies, the ghosts retain most of their characteristics/habits from when they were alive. For instance, the opposition between science and superstition is ironically ruptured from within when the alien artifact AI (Kaji) turns on a ghost-attractor application and shows Latu some real ghosts: a man, who was a dedicated researcher, has become a book in his ghostly form, and a

²⁷ *Bhoot*, in the specific usage of the past, is usually opposed to *bhobisshoyt* or the future.

spring-like spirit jumping about angrily was a quarrelsome woman when alive. Kaji explains that human science is still not advanced enough to recognize ghosts, validating these real ghosts through advanced alien technological means.

The existence of these real ghosts are validated by sensory experience as well: they can show themselves suddenly (in the sense of “appearing/arising”), converse intelligently with humans and aliens, and also possess a human while leaving the human’s consciousness intact; in fact, they require a human body to be able to manipulate anything solid. In *Patalghor*, Bhootnath Nandy encounters scientist Aghor Sen’s ghost, immediately reversing his faith in scientific rationality in fright. Aghor Sen scolds him and explains that ghosts are entirely scientific and nothing but “transformation of matter”, before giving him a hint to use Sonatan’s unlucky ability against the bad alien. Aghor Sen was scheduled to attend a lecture by Archimedes in Bigyan-lok, the Realm-of-Science in the afterlife reserved for scientists and thinkers (obviously absent in Hindu cosmology). When Bhootnath pulls out his pistol to commit suicide and go straight to Bigyan-lok and meet Einstein, Galileo and other scientists, Aghor Sen scolds him again, advising him to stick to the straight and narrow, otherwise he would forfeit his ticket to Bigyan-lok (92-96). An ironic take on both Hindu eschatology and scientism is apparent here; the interpenetration of science and religion creates ironic hybrids like a scientist’s ghost or Bigyan-lok, and a reversal of belief is precipitated.

Again, in *Ahorgunj*, when *tantrik* Bogolapoti, who claims to have two pet *dehati* ghosts, is shown real ghosts by the “simple-minded” Lalmohan, he faints in fright. Later, two of the ghosts, Jogen and Mukunda, possess Bogolapoti and Guchhayit with their consent, and their supernatural strength defeats the intruder strongmen Chiru and Sachi. The irony is taken further in this novella, when Mukunda, a virulent atheist in life, refuses to acknowledge the fact that he

himself has become a ghost after death. When his fellow ghost Jogen tries to convince him by arguing that his funeral rituals have been completed and his wife was leading the life of a widow, Mukunda rages about these as superstitions and evil practices which have nothing whatsoever to do with him. Later, Jogen correctly identifies the alien Ra as having come to earth from Shatam planet in the Ursa Major constellation, which is one of the places he sometimes visits by taking a single leap with his airy body. The wide universe is the ghosts' playground; spaceships are passé. When it's Ra's turn to leave via an advanced technological tube of light, Mukunda however jumps out from Guchhayit's body and enters the light, because he would rather travel to Shatam by "scientific" means. Even the demonstrable fact of Mukhunda's own ghost-ness cannot deter him from the scientific-atheist ideology that he professed when he was alive— this points to how science operates in this series as a belief-system akin to western scientism, even though there is no reversal of faith here as seen in the other instances (see "What is Scientism?"). Through Mukunda's total dismissal of the first tenets of scientific enquiry— observing phenomena and attempting to logically explain causal relationships— the text reemphasizes here the irrationality of belief-systems, whether science or religion (see "Steps of the Scientific Method").

Aliens

All four texts feature one or more aliens. In keeping with the unambiguous moral universe that characterizes the three series discussed in previous chapters, the alien or ultimate Outsider/Stranger figure is either good or bad, though Kaji, the alien AI, is somewhat exceptional in that being a machine without a conscience, it cannot consciously take sides in the war between good and bad. The good aliens are indistinguishable from humans in physical appearance, though they have superhuman qualities (strength, toughness, longevity, superior intelligence) that make them nearly immortal on Earth. In the good camp are Ramraha and Ra.

Ramraha's presence connects *Bhuture Ghoṛi* and *Golmaal* and he is matched with two alien adversaries in the two novellas: Khrutch Khrutch, who resembles a crueller Abraham Lincoln to Latu, and the technologically advance but “*borbor*” (barbarous) aliens who want to kidnap the globe, respectively. Ra is *Aghorgunj*'s telepathic alien who is shipwrecked on earth, and *Patalghor* features the bad aliens Vik and his father Hik.

While associations with the godly prince Ram is evident in the naming and characterization of the good alien Ramraha—he is handsome, courteous, thoughtful and saves a train from being looted by dacoits—he most certainly is *not* visiting earth to set up the proverbial *ramrajya*, the utopic and just kingdom helmed by the mythical Ram, and which Gandhi envisioned independent India to become. Instead, he is uncharacteristically (for superheroes in general) melancholy and pessimistic, acts like somewhat of a coward, mostly stays behind the scenes, and as soon as the catastrophe is avoided, returns to his spaceship at the bottom of the ocean. Similarly, despite his superhuman strength and stamina, Ra, the telepathic alien in *Aghorgunj* requires the assistance of humans to return to his home planet Shatam. This reemphasizes the role of the accidental-hero representing and/or banding together with his community in an effort to save the human species. The idea that a higher power, be it god or alien or, for that matter, the police or military, will not appear to protect the community from crisis is reemphasized here.

Both Ramraha and Ra describe their own alien worlds in roughly the same way and have a similar assessment of Earth culture based on their experience of the “euoptic” small-town. In their own worlds, both located in the Ursa Major constellation, people are workaholics, devoid of emotion or spontaneity and do not make mistakes. While Ramraha's alien adversaries are ethically transgressive, in Ra's world there is no distinction between good and bad people, only

between those with higher or lower intelligence. *Aghorgunj*, in particular, privileges the mother-child relationship that develops between Karali-daktar's paranoid wife Surabala and Ra the stranded alien, over any scientific or estranging details, humanizing the alien who confesses that no such familial relationships exist in his own world²⁸. It is this contrast between their culture and Earth culture that endears the planet to them; humans, while fragile, are spontaneous, brave and act out of love even when the odds are stacked against them—a (clichéd) reaffirmation of humankind's better qualities.

Insofar as the bad aliens are concerned, Ramraha's nemesis in *Bhuture Ghoṛi*, Khrutch Khrutch, is described as a greedy, overambitious competitor, who, while being initially kind to Latu whom he contacts through Kaji, shows his true colors and promises to shatter the earth into smithereens from space when he fails to find Ramraha. In *Golmaal*, the aliens are described as *danobs* from Hindu mythology, and resemble great apes in size, though they are not hairy. They are cruel and "barbarous", as they plan to set off depth charges to wrench earth out of its orbit and transport it to their own constellation. This would exterminate all life on earth, and then they would terraform it as an agricultural planet for their own growing population. Their assessment of earthlings is clearly malicious and their regard for the planet, non-existent. In *Patalghor*, however, the bad aliens are technically in the "right", as the equipment Aghor Sen used to cryo-imprison Sonatan was originally the alien Hik's, and he sends his son Vik to recover what was rightfully his. Vik is patient and pragmatic, though he had no qualms in killing people when necessary. Like Ramraha and Ra, Hik and Vik are aware of the potential dangers to human civilization if they are exposed to advanced alien technology, but the latter's blatant disregard for

²⁸ It is through this parent-child relationship that Ra's character can simultaneously be placed within the category of peripheral juveniles such as Latu, Ghoṛi and Angti. Surabala's immediate attachment to this mute but telepathic alien as a son she never had, underscores the sort of open-minded acceptance of the other/stranger that characterizes this series.

human life sets their actions apart. *Patalghor* also ends ambiguously with Bhootnath's reversal of faith and requesting *apoya* Sonatan's "*payer dhulo*" ("dirt underneath feet", a sign of respect for elders), and the future applications of Hik's alien technology for humans remains unclear.

Mukhopadhyay leaves the aliens as mysterious in the end as they were in the beginning by drawing them in broad strokes; these aliens are interesting not so much in how estranged they are, but what they reveal about the values of the residents, individually and collectively, circling back to the ethical mores that characterize this eutopic world. In terms of how alien technology is framed and explained in SF, the three (chronologically) early texts do make some effort in making them sound plausible, mostly extrapolating from known scientific theories; for instance, describing the coveted golden sphere as an electro-magnetic pulse (EMP) blaster in *Golmaal*. In *Aghorgunj*, however, Ra's "tubular system of space travel" that has rendered spaceships obsolete is mere scientific window-dressing and metaphor; Ra compares it to the metaphorical "*monorath*", (literally, "mind-chariot", usually understood as a wish or a desire) thus: "All imagination (*kalpana*) has a form (*ruup*). And a concretization (*ruupayan*)" (89). While one could invoke Delany's oft-cited stylistic interpretation of SF as a concretization of metaphor through technological means, any framing within a scientific paradigm is bypassed with the "human science isn't advanced enough" axiom here.

The inclusion of helpful ghosts, ineffectual scientists and cowardly or malicious aliens in these four novellas thus opens up alternative ways to apprehend both religion and science. What is commonly understood as superstition is ruptured and reinvented, as are the concepts of verisimilar reality and science itself, which is understood less as a self-correcting mechanism of experiment and theory (the "scientific method") shared by a network of experts, and more as a belief system posed against religion, where adherents are equally blinkered towards alternative

explanations which go against what “science” teaches them to believe. In a recent interview with the first kalpabigyan web-magazine *Kalpabiswa*, Mukhopadhyay states as much, when he argues that theists and atheists are mirrored in their belief systems; since humans are bound by sensory experience, there is no way for him (personally) to be absolutely certain that there is no afterlife or ghosts (year 1 issue 4, 32). He also criticizes the practices of the contemporary scientific establishment as being “*ati-bigyan*”, literally “super-science”, with the direct connotation of “misguided science”:

Why should I care if there’s water on Mars? I think these [space explorations] [possibly hinting at Elon Musk’ SpaceX efforts] should be stopped and we should care more about saving the planet [...] Soon all fossil fuels will be gone. Reduce cars. Reduce indiscriminate deforestation. Instead of fixing these, what’s the point in worrying about the sky? (33)

Mukhopadhyay’s humanist impulse and recognition of the ecological crises facing the world today is also implicit in the worldbuilding of his delimited eutopias, in which one is content and proud of what characterizes, celebrates and is available to one, even if that may be less than other people elsewhere . Mukhopadhyay’s professed views help sum up some of the major issues encountered in this chapter so far.

I now move on to another interpretive use of *adbhuta* and *hāsya* (comic) rasas, and a reading of a translated excerpt from the text of *Bhūtūre Ghorī* illustrating reversal of faith as previously argued, in the final section of the chapter.

Hāsyā and *adbhuta*: Structural Affinities

The two dominant *rasas* in these novellas are, quite clearly, *hāsyā* and *adbhuta*. Indeed, it is striking that with the exception of “magic show”²⁹, all the *vibhāvas* from Bharata’s *adbhuta* formulation can be found in these texts; moreover, the two modes of *adbhuta rasa*— “That which is divine and that which is born of joy. The divine (*adbhutarasa*) arises from seeing heavenly sights, the *adbhutarasa* which is born from joy comes from delight (ie. the fulfillment of one’s desires)” —are *both* present here (insert in the original; Masson and Patwardhan 1: 57). *Adbhuta* here is not merely limited to its material or supernatural causes, but informs narrative structure here in ways distinct from the three previous series and Mitra’s dystopic novel. Unfettered “joy” is certainly not an emotion that can be ascribed to any of these previous texts; even though the protagonists there achieve what they desire, it comes after much struggle and conflict. In contrast, as Sinhachowdhury reports from interviews with Mukhopadhyay:

The author believes that a positive force governs our life...he tells me that he does not end his stories with a mournful sigh, he takes pains to end them on a positive note. To do the contrary would be easier; the most facile thing for an author is to kill one of his characters to terminate a story. On the other hand, the discernible reader would not accept a happy ending forced upon the storyline! Therefore Shirshendu travels circuitous paths to make endings both happy and credible. Some readers have told him that they rediscovered their desire to live after reading his works³⁰. And that, the author feels, is his greatest reward. [*Tomorrow, I Promise* ix]

²⁹ The phrase in Sanskrit is a combination of *mayā* and *indrajaal*. “Magic show” as translated by Masson and Patwardhan falls far short of the wide range of “*mayā*”; “*indrajaal*”, on the other hand, refers specifically to magic shows with magicians, ie. tricks and optical illusions, in current usage.

³⁰ This comment is particularly relevant to Mukhopadhyay’s biography: battling with depression and suicidal tendencies in his 30’s, Mukhopadhyay sought the spiritual guidance of Thakur Anukulchandra (1888-1969), a revered ascetic and founder of philanthropic organization Satsang. In his autobiographical writings and interviews, Mukhopadhyay mentions the profound and positive impact of that experience. Since then, “Ra: Swa Bande Sri Sri Anukulchandram” is imprinted as dedication on the paratext of every single volume he pens.

Even though these are reflections on Mukhopadhyay's writing for adults, they are even more directly relevant to his *adbhūṭe* series. Not only do the selected texts end on a "happy and credible" "positive note", with the exception of Khrutch Khrutch³¹ in the early text *Bhūṭe Ghoṛi*, not a single character dies in any of the narratives, largely excluding *karuṇa* and *śānta* rasas from the emotive ambience of the texts. In the later texts, while villains are not always reformed, they get a chance to escape, like the bad aliens in *Golmaal* and *Patalghor* and the bad hired goons in *Aghorgunj*. When the "barbarous" aliens are defeated in *Golmaal*, "[n]either Ramraha nor anyone else decided any punishments for them. Otherwise, they'd have to be executed. But they promised Ramraha never to attack earth in the future" (127). Occasionally, transitory states or causes that conflict with these two dominant rasas are suggested, but are quickly subsumed under *hāsya* or *adbhūta* in treatment. *Śṛṅgāra* (erotic), *raudra* (furious) and *bībhatsa* (disgusting) are also usually excluded from the emotive ambit of most *kishor sahitya*, and these texts are no exception.

Vīra rasa, associated with *adbhūta* and manifested as heroism in the overcoming of struggles, remains undeveloped and undermined even in sequences involving exchange of blows between good and bad characters, as the difference in their strengths is apparent even before the fighting starts. For instance, the good alien Ramraha easily wrestles the "barbarous" aliens by throwing them like so many potato-sacks. Ramraha's characterization closely parallels the "Dhiraprasānta" (noble and peaceful) hero-type from the *Natyasastra*, the paradigmatic example of which is *Mahabharata*'s Yudhisthira (M. Ghosh trans. *Nāṭyaśāstra*, 203; *Nāṭyaśāstra* XXXIV, 18-19). True to type, Ramraha privileges truth and justice above all else, even if it means

³¹ Khrutch Khrutch's greed causes his death when he attempts to take Kaji by force, grabs its antimatter-clone instead and disintegrates instantaneously. The young boy Latu makes an uncomplicated moral choice of saving earth over saving a cruel alien by not warning him.

appearing cowardly and sacrificing or endangering his allies. In *Bhutuṛe Ghoṛi*, Ramraha hides in a cupboard and leaves Latu to confront the dangerous and brutal Khrutch Khrutch, and in *Golmaal*, he stays behind the scenes and plans for months while the “barbarous” aliens set depth-charges to blast earth out of its orbit, only infiltrating their spaceship at the very last moment. He excuses his unwillingness to take center-stage in the “action” by stating that his weapons capable of destroying bad aliens would also destroy earth (*Golmaal* 109). Far from being the *Dhiroddhata* (noble and arrogant/imperial) hero-type personified in his mythological namesake Ram, he remains a reluctant superhero, allowing the accidental heroes to shine.

These accidental heroes are all *madhya* or middling characters; Bharata describes a “middling” character as: “one who is skilled in the ways of the world, who is proficient (in actually) using the science of practical arts, and who has practical wisdom (*vijñāna*) and gentleness” (Masson and Patwardhan 1:41; *Nāṭyaśāstra* XXIV 2-10). As Chattopadhyay argues, the dialectical tension between *gyan* (*jñāna*; “all encompassing knowledge, including knowledge of the material as well as the transcendental world”) and *vigyan* (*vijñāna*, “knowledge of the material world... science...only one kind of knowledge” which “refers to “real” secular knowledge, culled from the morass of doxa and made to relay the accuracy and reality of experience”) is crucial to the kalpabigyan phenomenon (“Mythologerm”, 436).

It is perhaps no coincidence that in most of Bangla SF, “middling characters”, who are supposed to be worldly-wise and possessed of scientific/practical wisdom, take center stage in the unfolding of novum-events which relate directly to their sphere of expertise, unlike *uttama* (noble) or *adhama* (base) characters. “True” nobility/heroism of *vīra* rasa as found in Sanskrit poetry or pre-colonial Bangla literature has little relevance in the literary output of colonial or postcolonial Indian contexts (broadly), which, also influenced by the bourgeois novel, mostly

privileges the “common man” as “hero”. The proportion of retained aesthetic mores, the peculiar blinkered worldview of the postcolonial Bengali middle-class, and the auspices of history, is perhaps impossible to determine in this instance. In any case, Anglo-American SF protagonists display many more elements (causes, effects, transitory states) of *vīra* rasa, generally, than found in the protagonists of kalpabigyan.

Interestingly, *bhayānaka*, the ruling rasa of suspense in combination with *adbhuta* and usually arising from causes like ghastly noises, inauspicious portents, eerie locations and supernatural entities like ghosts, is reconfigured in these narratives. The “anticipatory fear” generated by elements which remain just beyond the boundaries of perception and experience are naturalized/ de-estranged, for instance, as seen in the previously mentioned example where Bogolapoti initially faints when shown real ghosts by Lalmohan, but later acquiesces to being possessed by Jogen’s ghost. The helpful ghosts, once revealed in their undisputable being-ness, are stripped of any frightening associations, and shift squarely to the realm of *adbhuta*, especially in the sense that their powers cause beholders to exclaim in (positive) wonder and awe.

Similarly, the consequences on the beholders of the *apoya* Gobinda and Sonaton Biswas would normally tend towards *bhayānaka* and/or *karuṇa*, but are reconfigured here as *hāsya*. For instance, on the first morning that Subuddhi and Kartik encounter Gobinda, a number of accidents befall them, leading to injuries and loss/spoiling of food; later, Vik the bad alien is seriously injured with a fractured leg and a concussion. But the treatment in these sequences privileges *hāsya* over *karuṇa* and *bhayānaka*, reminiscent of the fine line between laughter and

sadness that Tagore proposed: so long as the injury or accident does not cause serious damage or death, it is fit for comic representation³².

While one would be tempted to link “joy” to “happiness” to the act of laughter and therefore the comic, little in the *Natyasastra* would support this claim. In contrast, *hāsya* arises from the *sthāyibhāva hās* or laughter, and is usually enjoyed by “children, fools and women” (Masson and Patwardhan 1:40). Bharata describes it as being caused by “wearing clothes or ornaments that belong to someone else or do not fit, shamelessness, greed, tickling certain sensitive parts of the body, telling fantastic tales, seeing some comic deformity, and describing faults” (Masson and Patwardhan 1:50). All these specific causes are found in the novellas here, along with the tendency implicit in Bharata’s formulations towards irony, satire and parody; for instance, clothes/ornaments/ characteristics that “do not fit” could easily be channeled as parody and caricature, and “describing faults” as satire. This also fits well within the literary tradition of “western” utopian texts where these three comic devices have been used generously. *Hāsya* predominates in roughly the first two-thirds of the narratives, corresponding to sections that focus on verisimilar elements. Among Bharata’s eight rasas, *hāsya* is perhaps the most context-dependent; what might elicit laughter in one may require extensive explanations for another, largely undercutting any spontaneous (and rasa, though rule-bound, is simultaneously supposed to be spontaneous) outpouring of laughter. However, I attempt a translation and analysis below.

Though it could simply be context-specific “situational comedy”, *hāsya* here is more usually channeled via irony, parody and satire into situations affecting reversal of belief /faith, while *adbhuta* is channeled in both its material and supernatural causes, often acting as a catalyst

³² Indeed, Bangla comic literature in general uses this fine distinction liberally to elicit laughter at the plight of characters in unsavory situations; examples occur in all three series we have encountered so far, though I have not analyzed them in detail there.

for comic reversal. In *Bhuturē Ghoṛi*, we see “situational comedy” in an argumentative pairing between the Shakta tantrik Jotai and the Vaishnavaa Nitya Das on the superiority of one sect over the other, caricaturing but also deviating from commonly circulating stereotypes on the practitioners of these two main Hindu sects in Bengal.

[...] It’s been a few days since a Vaishnava called Nitya Das has settled in the area. What an annoyance! Jatai tantrik can’t stand those Vaishnavas. Tulsi-beads strung in a garland, sandalwood *tilaks*³³, sham politeness, benevolent smiles and sickly sweet words... to him, all this seems very effeminate. Yes, tantra is the *sadhana*³⁴ proper for a man! Sitting atop a corpse at midnight and chanting prayers, commerce with ghosts and spirits, drinking *karon*³⁵ from a skull...such practices are beyond those lily-livered Vaishnavas.

But the man Nitya Das is very cunning. As soon as its morning, he goes on *madhukori*. In other words, begging; Jatai tantrik simply detests begging. On his way, Nitya Das often drops in to Jatai’s place, chanting mildly “Jai Nitai, Jai RadhaMadhav, Jai Mahaprabhu!”

In response, Jatai bellows in his most awe-inspiring baritone “JJay KKali! JJay KKali! JJay ShibShambho! BbBbmm-Bmm!”

Many have fainted at that roar—but not Nitya Das. An image of piety and courteousness with folded hands, wide smirk fixed firmly in place, he says, everyday, “May Krishna have mercy on you! Are Kali and Krishna really different! That which is Krishna is also Shiva! My humblest respects! May I have some tea?” (*Bhuturē Ghoṛi*, 29)

Jotai is, as previously mentioned, a parody of militant religious nationalism in Bengal with its ruling deity as Kālī (Shakti), largely in opposition to that stream of Hinduism which privileges Ram, Hanuman and Laxmi, more popular along the Hindi-speaking northern-Indian “cow belt”. Also largely in opposition to the followers of Ram are the Vaishnavas or those who consider Krishna as their ruling deity (and Sri Chaitanya [Nitai Mahaprabhu] as his incarnation); since the 15th century, Vaishnavism has been the predominant Hindu sect in Bengal. Jotai Tantrik claims that Goddess Kali is more powerful and her followers are more masculine and

³³ Markings on the forehead and nose.

³⁴ Practice, usually religious, though the word has varied connotations also applied to secular contexts.

³⁵ Specially prepared ritual alcoholic drink.

fearless, as they must practice rituals in *samsans* (cremation grounds) and use corpses, skulls and bones for their rituals. Being the resident healer, tamer of ghosts, and dispenser of spiritual guidance to the local population, Jotai is apprehensive that Nitya Das, a migrant mendicant, will steal his religious “practice”. He considers Vaishnavas in general to be effeminate smooth-talking beggars up to no good—Nitya Das appears to fit the bill when he drops by for morning tea everyday at Jotai’s “*sadhanpeeth*” (place of worship). The comic reversal happens, interestingly, with the appearance of the talking wristwatch Kaji transmitting instructions in an alien language, as we see below:

Jatai tantrik’s pet ghost Banchharam usually sleeps in an earthen *hanṛi*³⁶. He has few whims, and wakes up promptly as soon as it is evening. Every day at dusk Jatai tantrik bellows at him “Ore Banchha!” and Banchharam obediently slithers out of the *hanṛi*.

[...] Haran had left the watch with him. Jatai tantrik looked it over. The watch was strange. He hadn’t seen a watch quite like this one before.

[...] While Jatai was examining the watch, a voice near him said “Khuch Khuch. Khuche. Ramraha.”

Jatai almost jumped out of his skin, calling out “Who’s there?”

But no one could be seen nearby. It was broad daylight all around. Jatai looked around himself, dumbfounded.

“Jai Radhe! Jai Nitai! Jai RadhaGobindo! You are well, *prabhu*?” With these words, Nitya Das walked in, smirk intact.

Jatai was too flabbergasted to roar his usual ‘JJay KKali’; absent-mindedly scratching his head, he mumbled “Jai Nitai! Hope you are well, Nitya Das.”

Hearing the words “Jai Nitai” from the *tantrik*’s mouth, Nitya Das forgot to blink. Completely taken aback for a while, he suddenly came to his senses and started jumping with both hands in the air, shouting “The name of Ram from a ghost³⁷! Jai Nityananda! Jai RadhaGobindo! Jai..!”

Suddenly they heard a harsh voice nearby, reprimanding “Ramraha! Khrach Khrach! Ramraha! Ramraha! Khuch Khuch!”

“Did you say something?” Nitya Das looked at Jatai.

Jatai, too, looked around, shaking his head “No. But *someone* said something.”

[...]Unexpectedly, again, that disembodied voice, “Nantang! Rikiriki! Ramraha!”

³⁶ Pot for cooking rice.

³⁷ “*Bhut –er mukhe Ram naam*” is an aphorism, indicating someone saying something that is completely opposed to their beliefs and opinions.

Nitya Das let out a sigh, “Jai Kali! Jai Kali!”

Jatai looked at him in disbelief, and in a weak voice, said “So you took Kali’s name after all?”

Nitya Das gave him a pained look, “Why do you deceive me, *prabhu*³⁸? I understand everything now. Let me have a bit of dust from your feet. I did not believe in your Banchharam-ghost till now. I thought *prabhu* was just telling tall-tales. But today, I have proof.”

“Banchharam” Jatai looked worried for a moment, and then in a dejected voice, said “Maybe.”

[...] Suddenly, a peal of laughter, and a very musical girl’s voice said, “Ryada Kali! Ramraha! Buut! Buut!”

Nitya Das opened his eyes wide “Who is that? Is it Banchhasita?”

“Who’s Banchhasita?” Jatai replied, disconcerted.

“Why of course, Banchharam’s wife! Oh, how it calms my soul to hear these holy words from a ghost. It said Radha Kali Ram Bhut. ”

Forgetfully, Jatai uttered “Jai Radhe! Jai Radhe!”

Nitya Das shook his head “Please don’t take that name again, *prabhu*! Vaishnava religion is no religion at all! I’ve realized today that Tantra is the real *sadhana*. Jai Kali! Jai ShibShambho!”

With wet eyes, Nitya Das laid himself at Jatai’s feet and touched the dust to his forehead and tongue. And then, forgetting the tea, he left. (*Bhuture Ghori*, 28; 20; 30-34)

This Banccharam-Banchhasita sequence would be spontaneously hilarious to the Bengali reader, as the latter name is a nonsense portmanteau, playing on the marital relationship between Ram and Sita. Banchha-Ram, literally, “desire for Ram”, used to be a name given to male domestic help in middle-class households, who were usually migrants from the Hindi-speaking belt (common slang, *dehati* or *khotta*) or from the neighboring coastal state Odisha, while their real names were often forgotten. The idea is that by uttering the name of Ram (or Gobindo, another name common to male domestic help) numerous times during the day by calling the servants, the middle-class householder can wash away their *paap* (sins) and go to heaven. This of course, is a very simplified form of the ritual peculiar to Vaishnavism which privileges the practice of chanting holy names. Nitya Das’s misinterpretation of alien signals “Ryada Kali!

³⁸ Lord/master; honorific in religious contexts. Nitya Das’s use is however extremely sarcastic.

Ramraha! Buut! Buut!” as holy words “Radha Kali Ram Raja Bhoot Bhoot”, lays out all three Hindu sects (religion) and ghosts in a continuum. We also see, close-up, how the supernatural deployed as ghosts seem to be the privileged explanatory framework, rather than a scientific or rational one, even though the source of the supernatural is a technological gadget. The implicit social commentary on phony godmen is couched in “situational comedy”, and the reader is encouraged to laugh at both Jatai tantrik’s and Nitya Das’s lack of conviction in their chosen belief-systems, reversed by the small incident of a talking watch, which could simply have been a human-made technological gadget (like a smart watch today). Thus *adbhuta*, deployed as the workings of the supernatural (in ghosts) but really in the working of alien technology, causes a comic reversal of faith in this and other sequences in the texts.

Conclusion

Sirshendu Mukhopadhyay is undoubtedly one of the most prominent kalpabigyan authors active today, and while his *adbhuture* series has become somewhat formula-bound over the last 40 years, they have also single-handedly redefined kalpabigyan and Bangla speculative fiction in general. The quaint, geographically and temporally delimited eutopias in these novellas present a storyworld where eccentricity is the norm, and alien, ghostly and human “others” are accepted so long as they abide by the core moral values of humanism, kindness, inclusivity and so on. The series, while subtly critiquing social evils of the context from which it is inspired, present alternatives to the latter by omission and reversal, especially reversal of belief when it comes to science and superstition. The series also utilizes both modes of *adbhuta* rasa, and in combination with the comic, brings us to a joyful and entertaining finale.

CONCLUSION

I came to this dissertation as an avid reader of speculative and genre fiction in Bangla and English. Several scholarly works on the relationship between SF and coloniality and/or postcoloniality from South Asia have appeared since then, but these largely remain restricted to Indian Writing in English, glossing over SF in at least 7 major Indian languages, a lacuna that can only be *partially* attributed to a relative scarcity of translations into English. Indian scholars also appear to have largely sidestepped critical engagement with SF as a genre in their own *bhasha* or regional languages. These two factors have prompted me to devote this dissertation almost exclusively to the underappreciated phenomenon of postcolonial kalpabigyan.

By “Postcolonial”, I have 2 meanings in mind: one, texts produced after Independence from British rule, and two, following Robert Young, the texts and theories that “seek to combat the continuing, often covert operation of an imperialist system of economic, political and cultural domination” (*Postcolonialism* 58). The earliest texts considered here, Premendra Mitra’s *Manu Dwadosh* and the Ghana-da series, situate the non-western “other” within cultural, scientific, economic and racial/ethnic matrices present in/ extrapolated from the time frame immediately following WWII, contesting, subverting and rupturing these taken-for-granted formations from within¹. The next two series, in chronological order, Satyajit Ray’s Professor Shonku and Adrish Bardhan’s Professor Nat Boltu Chakra, carve out a space for the Indian and Bengali scientist within an international network of scientists and scientific institutions, while simultaneously critiquing intra-national developments. Uncommon narrative structures (tall-tale, diary), and

¹ Mitra’s texts may also be read in the light of the Cold War and Non-Aligned Movement, which is an avenue that I hope to pursue in future versions of these chapters.

avoidance of the “alien space-future time” trope familiar to Anglophone and other dominant SF paradigms, activates historical self-reflexivity and interrogation of “otherness” in these texts. And finally, in Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay’s delimited eutopias, we find an altogether different configuration of postcoloniality that is almost entirely concerned with the local, as versus the global, in the foregrounding of “universal” ethical mores and a whole-hearted acceptance of the “others” who exist on the fringes of middle-class Bengali modernity. This last instance of postcoloniality is not performative (as for instance argued by Graham Huggan in *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, 2001), nor does it sit comfortably within categories proposed by postcolonial scholars of history and realist fiction (such as “mimicry” or “the subaltern”) or speculative fiction (such as Bill Ashcroft’s *Utopianism in Postcolonial Literatures*, 2016). Perhaps we need an entirely new vocabulary to speak about these post-globalization texts.

On the other hand, “Kalpabigyan”— as the accepted moniker for science-fiction-type narratives in Bangla— points to a peculiar tension between imagination (*kalpana*) and science (*bigyan*). Kalpabigyan shares with other SF the propensity to extrapolate and speculate on known scientific theories (Suvin’s two types of SF); it also further challenges scientificity² itself by foregrounding the “otherness” of those who “make science”. In foregrounding the imagination, it fractures science, and also brings to light those “others” that have fallen out of what is accepted as the “purely scientific”— indigenous and esoteric scientific traditions, pseudo-scientific/ discredited theories and diverse mythologies from within and beyond India. As Adrish Bardhan, who coined the term kalpabigyan, says through his mouthpiece Dinanath Nath, “Just as ghost stories are not for ghosts, science fiction is not for scientists” (Bardhan 2: 460). Kalpabigyan as a

² Conditions determining what is considered scientific activity in any given historical context.

genre, with the exception of Premendra Mitra's work, has been much-criticized for not lining up even the basic tenets of textbook science, and this is important in the context of a technoscientifically "developing" nation like India, where much science education happens outside the classroom. But where "scientific education through entertainment" falls short, kalpabigyan opens up robust avenues to global trends in the genre and introduces the SF megatext to the Bengali reader. Indeed, by borrowing, appropriating and "transcreating" the very narratives of "western" SF that enshrined the white male hero and made monsters out of racial and gendered "others", kalpabigyan often enacts plagiarism as reverse colonialism, as seen most strikingly in Bardhan's oeuvre.

Postcolonial kalpabigyan, as I have further argued, draws from and responds to the aesthetic parameters not only of "western" SF, but also the centuries-old tradition of Sanskritic aesthetics known as the *rasa* theory. I propose a re-newed theoretical framework for critically examining SF by identifying its dominant literary aesthetic as that of wonder (*adbhuta*). The *rasa* framework further enables reading other emotive states that accentuate the aesthetic response of wonder, such as the heroic, the comic and the grotesque. Together, these create a complete emotive-aesthetic ambience that makes an SF text memorable to the reader. The retention of these pre-colonial aesthetic mores are evident in the texts—for instance, the frequent invocation of the reader as a *rasika* or a person capable of appreciating *rasa*. But more importantly, different components of the texts are arranged in such a way that will appeal to what can only be called a "peculiar Indian consciousness" that prefers certain aesthetic ends and outcomes than others, perhaps alienating non-Indian readers in the process. Given the long history of both classical Sanskrit *rasas* and the Bhakti or devotional *rasas* in Bangla literature and culture, this is perhaps only to be expected, but is far from obvious at first glance. For instance, the recurrence of

mythology and the comic in kalpabigyan distances it from dominant SF traditions, but that does not detract from the “seriousness” with which kalpabigyan deals with issues such as race and colonialism.

To the best of my knowledge, this dissertation is the first and most sustained investigation of postcolonial kalpabigyan, tying together historicity, scientificity *and* aesthetics. It contributes to the field of SF criticism not only by making a “peripheral” SF tradition more visible to an international scholarship, but also by interrogating historical and generic premises of dominant SF paradigms, such as visions of progress through technology found commonly in pre-1960’s British and American SF. With the recent proliferation in non-western, non-Anglophone voices in SF from around the world, both in terms of anthologies and scholarly works, my dissertation seems to be in good company. Kalpabigyan’s overlaps and resonances with Afrofuturism (which activates the future to respond to slavery and colonialism, vis-à-vis kalpabigyan which reactivates the past), Latin American SF (in the distinction between decolonial and postcolonial critiques and integration of magical realist narrative techniques) and Russian SF (given the Communist connection between West Bengal and Russia between the 1970’s and early 1990’s) in particular offer interesting avenues for further study.

As for this dissertation’s contribution to Comparative Literature, I could perhaps not have written this at all without my training in the discipline for 14 years altogether. The work of translation is central to the practice of comparative literary criticism, and I have attempted to remain vigilant of those problematics, both for the primary texts in Bangla and those originally in Sanskrit. Further, it seems to me that the critical function of reading texts, especially those considered “peripheral” or “marginalized” internationally and/ or within their unique linguistic, social and political contexts, as well as drawing cross-cultural connections between texts across

time and space, is central to the work of comparatists. I draw just such comparative connections by reading postcolonial kalpabigyan vis-à-vis theories from history and philosophy of science, postcolonial and otherwise, which in itself is an uncommon approach within SF criticism³. This dissertation is also the first to employ rasa theory in reading contemporary SF, as rasa remains an *unarticulated* bedrock of cultural taste⁴ peculiar to Bengal and India even today. The critical function of debate, commentary and interpretation has been central to the two-millennia poetic tradition in Sanskrit, and in modifying these “pre-technoscientific” aesthetic axioms to suit contemporary texts and times, I hope to have contributed in some small way to the renewed visibility, use and continuation of rasa aesthetics from a comparative, cross-cultural perspective.

³ This approach, to the best of my knowledge, has been taken only by two scholars in the immediate field, and one of those monographs is yet to be published. These are Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay’s doctoral dissertation and Pablo Mukherjee’s study on postcolonial kalpabigyan, science and science policy in India.

⁴ By cultural taste I mean the appeal of particular modes of representation that this audience finds aesthetically pleasing, but other audiences might find inappropriate or estranging. Vikram Chandra also makes this argument in *Geek Sublime*.

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