

## Ageless Hero, Sexless Man: A Possible Pre- history and Three Hypotheses on Satyajit Ray's Feluda

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[**Abstract:**This paper offers a critique of Satyajit Ray's literature for young adults, a major part of which was dedicated to his popular and favorite sleuth, Feluda. The primary contention of this paper is that, since it was conceived on the pages of the Ray family magazine *Sandesh*, the Feluda stories have followed a rather taut, moral architecture that cannot be explained only in terms of categories that literature for young adults or children permit. The first part of the paper discusses at length the possible origins and formative influences of Ray's sleuth. The second part proposes three hypotheses that consider the entrenched phallocentrism and gentrified eco-system of the stories as both a psychoanalytic and a cultural problematic.]

There are good reasons why knowing about the Oedipus complex never replaces seeing or reading *Hamlet*. The story goes on working because it can't be explained away. So the question is: what, if anything, has a psychoanalytic interpretation got to add to this? Not, what is the story really about, but what does it make you go on thinking about, or wanting to say?

—Adam Philips, *On Balance*292

**I**dylls of Childhood and the Origins of Feluda<sup>1</sup>  
In his introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to Children's Literature*, M.O.Grenby writes:

Many of the most celebrated children's books have a famous origin story attached to them. Lewis Carroll made up "the interminable

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fairy-tale of *Alice's Adventures*" (as he called it in his diary) while he was on a boat trip with Alice, Lorina and Edith Lidell in 1862; Peter Pan grew out of JM Barrie's intense friendship with the five Llewelyn Davies boys; Salman Rushdie, following the Ayatollah Khomeini's 1989 *fatwa*, wrote *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* for his son Zafir, for Zafir, like Haroun, had helped his father recover the ability to tell stories. The veracity of these stories, and many others like them, are open to question. But their prevalence and endurance is nevertheless important. We seem to demand such originary myths for our children's classics. (3)

The origin of Satyajit Ray's private eye Feluda does not have such a readily available mythical narrative attached to it, but neither was it an act of fortuitous creative whim. A close appraisal of Ray's cultural and intellectual sphere might help us arrive at a possible prehistory of his favorite detective figure.

It was in early 1960 that Satyajit Ray was pondering the revival of a magazine that his grandfather, the publishing pioneer Upendrakishore, had started for children in 1913. Upendrakishore had by then already established *U Ray & Sons*, the home to the most advanced half-tone printing<sup>2</sup> set up in India and had put the full weight of its expertise into the children's magazine that he had founded. Known as *Sandesh*,<sup>3</sup> the magazine was a visual feast and unlike anything that existed in Bengal's crowded annals of literature for children.<sup>4</sup> In form and design, in the brightly textured illustrations, and in the range of topics covered, it was piquant, enlightening, and cosmopolitan. It would bring the news of innovation and discovery in all emerging forms of knowledge as well as a regular diet of well-meaning, tender, scrupulous literature that would suit the taste of a growing population of upper-class Bengali children, educated under a broad western curricula in local missionary schools, who were no more satisfied with home-bred translations, archaic *puranas*, fairy tales and School-Book Society primers.<sup>5</sup>

An authoritative survey in Bengali by Khagendranath Mitra titled *Shatabdir Shushu Sahitya* [A Century of Literature for Children], lists at least five periodicals—*Shishu*, *Balak*, *Mouchak*, *Amar Desh*, and *Anjali*—that were actively in circulation during the first (1913-15) phase of *Sandesh*. *Sandesh* was the newest and perhaps most significant addition to a growing roster of literary magazines for children and part of a substantive social investment in the idea of the child in a rapidly modernizing Bengal. Mitra also notes that until 1912 most periodicals and journals for children were published by organizations and societies. *Sandesh* marks the seminal shift in it being the first periodical whose reputation was contingent on its editor's vision and on the range of

contributions that were significantly of wider interest and decidedly cosmopolitan.

In that sense, these years also mark the real beginning of the construction of the child-subject as one of the important investments in the broadening project of modernity. In his work on children's literature in colonial Bengal, Satadru Sen writes:

By the first decades of the new [20<sup>th</sup>] century, the literary parenthood of the native adult had been established in children's magazines with subscriptions that ran into the thousands: Sudhir Sarkar's *Mouchak*, Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri's *Sandesh*, and Hemen Ray's *Rangmashal*, to name but a few. While these magazines are not all the same (*Sandesh* and *Mouchak* might be considered more cosmopolitan than the aggressively nationalist *Rangmashal*), they are not consistently different either. They collaborated broadly in the construction of a literary and pedagogical child that is generally Hindu and middle-class: Muslim children appear very infrequently, the occasional Christianity of the protagonist is carefully understated even in a Church-affiliated journal such as *Balak*, and non-*bhadralok* children feature either as servants or as outsiders. The childhood imagined is broadly but not simply gendered: protagonists are not inevitably boys, and the reader is only inconsistently imagined as male. Girl children, not surprisingly, appear as the bearers of 'tradition' and domesticity, but they also make occasional appearances as incompletely domesticated carriers of a middle-class modernity that might challenge colonial assumptions about Indian femininity in the era of Katherine Mayo and Mother India. (n.pag.)

Hence, one must be attentive to this entire politics of desiring the ideal child, the boy, as intrinsic to the formation of the subject in colonial Bengali literature for children. *Sandesh* took part in the project with all seriousness. As social reforms took deeper root, this ideation found more euphemistic devices to regale the boy-subject, among which the literary detective was to become a predominant one. Upendrakishore could edit the monthly *Sandesh* only for thirty-three months, but within that short period it had already stamped the magazine with an independent agenda. On his early death at fifty-three, the baton had passed to his son Sukumar, Satyajit Ray's father. Sukumar was an even more dazzling literary talent. His life was even shorter (1887-1923) but was largely engaged in writing for children, though he had earned serious fame as a humorist, satirist, caricaturist, as a brilliant exponent of "nonsense" form, quirky stories of truant children, adventures in exotic lands, and with an indigenous adaptation<sup>6</sup> of Lewis Carroll's Alice books, which was so wonderfully native to Sukumar's own language that few even remembered its source. *Sandesh* clearly was in the hands of its most fitting custodian (Sukumar edited it from 1915-1923) and among other stalwarts had Rabindranath Tagore praising its

pioneering role in setting distinctions of taste for all kinds of literature and literary activity for children. *Sandesh*, in fact, marked the most significant progress towards a marked gentrification of children's literature in the Bengali language. In another article ChandakSengoopta writes about the broader project of an inclusive nationalization that was started in the pages of *Sandesh*. Sengoopta writes:

*Sandesh*, the children's magazine founded by Upendrakishore Ray in 1913 and to which all his children and relatives contributed, can be seen as the Ray family's most significant contribution to constructive *swadeshi*. In spite of the imperial loyalty expressed in its early issues—the second number opened with a frontispiece depicting King Emperor George V and an article (unsigned but probably by Upendrakishore himself) in praise of Our Emperor—the magazine represented a fully indigenous initiative to provide Bengali children with the kind of healthy entertainment and subtle edification that would help them grow into ideal citizens. (378)

Either way, individual investment in the manufacture of an explicit child subjectivity began in earnest on the pages of *Sandesh* and continued to inform its future trajectory. But Sukumar's untimely death paralyzed its future once more. It was briefly revived between 1928 and 1930 only to be shelved again.

Not long after he started earning fame as a movie auteur did his peers urge Satyajit Ray to revive the magazine. *Sandesh* was first and foremost a family magazine and Ray, the most globally recognized of its constituents, had to stake claim to what was the Ray family's most iconic inheritance. His son Sandip was also entering the right age to find those keys to the world imagined on the pages of the magazine. *Sandesh* was an invitation to the idylls of childhood that Ray, though deprived of a father very early in life, experienced in full richness and wanted to revive for children of his son's generation.<sup>7</sup> A Rushdie kind of personal inquisition may just have played its part in the revival of the magazine.

However, after three decades since its closure, in 1960, when Ray planned to revive *Sandesh*, he could not have been unaware that the magazine had to carry the full weight and consciousness of its sterling legacy while at the same time remaining contemporary to a generation that was obviously and markedly different than that which patronized its initial years. As its editor, Ray had to continue to walk the talk with children, petition their perceived innocence—a program that *Sandesh* had carefully built as germane to its appeal—while he had to be attentive to the changing realities in a restive post-colonial society. By the early 1960s, the social eco-system had become skeptical towards any prospect of an equitable, just society that was a staple of nationalist social conditioning in the early to mid-twentieth century, with the

larger-than-life idea of an independent state feeding into all kinds of cultural programming in the decades leading to 1947.

To that end, from the vantage of the 1960s, the years of *Sandesh's* first publication seemed not just far and faded, but most of the social and cultural categories that had defined its moorings had become irretrievable. What was retained as residual perhaps was a resolute ideal of a childhood, a childhood retrievable from the overall project of modernity while untainted by the egotism of the complex postcolonial state. Change is inevitable, of course, but for a children's magazine in contentious search for continuity this was a big challenge that had surely stared Ray straight in his face.

One can suppose that Ray had realized that he needed more than just the good name of *Sandesh* to make the revival worthy of his hard work. It was because any talisman for children in the 1960s had to embody the ambiguity of the age, had to belong to an amorphous cusp of continuity and change, had to carry that right blend of scholarly cynicism and persistent sanctimony. Ray had to also locate the right vantage point—neither too young nor too close to adulthood. This vantage point would be a definitive progression from the world that *Sandesh* had left behind but would not be entirely foreign to the imminence of its transactional currency, which still remained the demography of the young. In an essay in the Ray memorial issue of the Bengali magazine *Desh*, literary critic Saroj Bandopadhyay explained the progression succinctly:

In the genre of literature in Bengali for children, Upendrakishore Roychowdhury, Ray's grandfather, sits like the high priest....His son Sukumar inherited the legacy with consummate ease....Satyajit followed with effortless gaiety....Upendrakishore wrote for children who would sit and listen to his stories from the secured cosset of the mother's lap....Sukumar wrote for those who had found candidature in a bigger world. The school-story form has been immortalised by him. This is the age when the world of belief is yet to be undermined by that of disbelief. Satyajitwrote for the next age-group; when the boy does not need a guardian, he understands the basis of personality. (95)

The premises of Ray's intended world of the *young boy* were hence comprehensively understood and in surprising agreement with the colonial construction of the child-subject, which was undertaken in earnest by his predecessors. In keeping with an emerging new nation, Ray's child-subject had to attain adolescence without entirely endangering the qualities of a vulnerable childhood. Ray's desired narrator-reader (*the young boy again*) would be ideally beyond the anxieties of dependent childhood and yet not adult with a prescribed and proscribed access to that world. The young adult's perception of

the adult world is dependent on signals he receives from that world, but his interpretations need not be dependent on them. Four years into the third avatar of *Sandesh*, when Prodosh C.Mitter, alias Feluda, appeared on the scene in 1965 with the eponymous *Feludar Goendagiri* [*The First Case of Feluda*], it carried just such a promise. Feluda was a delectably next-door, affable detective, whose daring-do adventures were penned for the young readership by his nephew Topshe, with Feluda hovering over the final form that the “published” version would be available in. Feluda was hence the reliable ombudsman of a world imagined as representative of the nuances of the 1960s, Topshe the critical vantage point whose limited access to that very world was his most assured advantage to stay true to his consciousness of the young adult. This way they feed into the *fantasy of the young boy* while giving the stories a highly choreographed temperament in which the implications of a deliberative literary perspective are tightly secured in their moral architecture. There are of course customary tightrope thrills of detective adventure: the resolute mobility of Feluda between *scenes of thinking* and *sites of action* and the climactic congress when the crime is decoded and the criminal brought to book. Ray’s son Sandip’s memoir *Ami ar Feluda* [*Feluda and Me*] confirms that the sleuth stayed with Ray literally to the maestro’s death,<sup>8</sup> forever young (gaining a total of eight years in thirty-five annual adventures) and on the other side of three decades and approximately two hundred thousand copies in sales.<sup>9</sup>

Ray’s preoccupation with young male children as agents of uprightness and innocence is not limited to his Feluda stories. It is evident in his films, too. Hank Heifetz, in his obituary on Ray in the *Cineaste* magazine, stated in the very beginning:

When *Pather Panchali* and *Aparajito* won their prizes in Cannes and Venice in 1956 and ‘57, Satyajit Ray became known as a lyric chronicler of rural poverty, for which the films were attacked as nationally demeaning by some mainstream Indian figures, though their real subject was childhood and adolescence confronting joy and death. (72)

A quick overview of Ray’s cinematic repertoire would show that Apu’s world is by no means an exception. The innocence of childhood or childlike innocence in men returned to seize Ray’s attention in a number of films: his two short films *Two* (1964) and *Pikoo’s Diary* (1981), as well as full-length features like *Adventures of Goopy and Bagha* (1969), *Golden Fortress*<sup>10</sup>(1974), *The Elephant God*<sup>11</sup>(1979), *The Kingdom of Diamonds* (1980), and his stilted and verbose last two films, *Branches of a Tree* (1990) and *The Stranger* (1991). In *The Stranger*, for example, Heifetz says:

The protagonist's sudden arrival, announced only by a letter, is mysterious, his identity felt as uncertain. The couple and their friends are suspicious of him and the stranger adds to the mystery by a Socratic, questioning kind of humor which at first reveals very little. Though the parents' overt behavior is friendly and the stranger charming, only the eleven-year-old son (Ray's final truth-bearing child in the trajectory that began with Subir Banerjee as the child Apu) immediately and unconditionally welcomes his new uncle. (73)

By comparing Ray's last "truth bearing" celluloid-child with his iconic first (Apu), Heifetz seems to be drawing a pertinent, overarching link across Ray's films in which children are guiltless bearers of faith and piety in a world otherwise racked by poverty or despoiled by distrust. This is not to claim that Ray's primary focus in his cinema is children but to insist on their itinerant, complimentary role in the overall moral climate in his films. So, in the magazine he edited, in the films he made, and in the bestselling fiction he wrote, then, if there is one omnipresent concern it is how childhood can be preserved, consolidated, and extended up to the last syllable even if that usurps the natural tendencies. To that end, childhood in Ray's work, especially in the Feluda stories, extends unproblematically to young adulthood and adolescence, unperturbed by any entrapment of puberty and the natural curiosity of the adolescent about his own changing anatomy and that of the sexual impulses around *him*. The overall moral universe remains unmitigated, incorruptible, and unapologetically phallogocentric.

#### **Feluda: Formative Categories**

Once Ray had secured the idea of childhood as a construct which was continuous to its originary, colonial project, Ray's concerns and thoughts turned to the idea of the detective fiction to which the bulk of his attention was going to go. We must note that there was a conspicuous, if tentative, convergence of the detective form with material fit for a young adult readership in Bengali literature before Ray. With Ray, the generic rituals of detective fiction merged seamlessly with his moral universe because Ray could make these rules, often codified by writers across languages, to sit superbly with conditions that were native to his own literary and social temperament.

The following are broadly the generic rules codified by Ray and hence critical to both Feluda's formation and reception: an easily identifiable cultural sphere of activity; a palpable fondness for the adventurism of the boy-thriller genre; a careful calibration of crime and the self-imposed limits displayed within the morally efficacious collective of characters; a kindred compatibility sustained through Feluda's un-ageing youth and brilliance; the reinforcement of the private-eye as the humane interventionist in the spoils of crime as

against the purported governmentality of the police; and finally, the censored, sexless charms of truth-bearing juvenilia.

The Peter Pan-like quality of *un-ageing* that Feluda and his comrades Topshe and Jatayu inherited from a great tradition in juvenile literature also placed them in direct continuity with other fictional figures of terrific appeal across a transnational spectrum of cultural memory. Jacqueline Rose, in her seminal work on JM Barrie's *Peter Pan*, had claimed how the real author and the fantasized child were caught in a sexual relation, helmed powerfully by the author. The same, she said, could be true for Lewis Carroll's Alice stories. One may not want to pursue this claim further in case of Ray's insistence on a status-quo age of the adolescent narrator Topshe, but one cannot be oblivious to a certain desire that the author projects on the serial-narrator. Rose writes:

Suppose, therefore, that Peter Pan is a little boy who does not grow up, not because he does not want to but because someone else prefers that he shouldn't. Suppose, therefore, that what is at stake in Peter Pan is the adult's desire for the child....I am using desire to refer to a form of investment by the adult in the child, and to the demand, made by the adult on the child as the effect of that investment, a demand that fixes the child and then holds it in place. (3-4)

Though Peter Pan and Alice are considerably younger in their fictionalized form, and hence considerably more vulnerable than Topshe, the unchanging locus of his age does bring into question the agency of the writer. Unlike Pan and Alice, Topshe is also a serial narrator of Feluda's adventures, which were published for close to three decades. In that sense, Topshe, who is thirteen-and-half in the first adventure, should have been close to mid-40s by the end of the series, had he grown with it. But he obviously does not, leaving us free to ask if Ray is aiming at a specific set of tropes that would appeal to a specific kind of readership. Clearly, Topshe's (and Feluda's and Jatayu's) frozen age is desired to be at par with one cohort of a reading generation, who will leave it behind for the next. The trio must remain unaged, frozen in a set of notions, because ageing would destroy the narrative regime that Ray would want to construct. For example, ossified in perpetual adolescence, Topshe would be denied access to things and sights beyond what the desire of the author entails him to and would keep re-producing the child in the adolescent. In a similar vein, both Feluda and Jatayu would continue to function as ageless agencies, standing sentient to the right climatic conditions that can reproduce an adolescent gaze not as a factor of age but of vantage. *Un-ageing* is hence "unproblematic" in the Feluda canon, because Ray could successfully decouple ageing from its biological imperatives and turn it into a scopic leitmotif, a *way of seeing*.

It is for the same reason that the Feluda adventures never really become hard-boiled detective stories. There is very little of Poirot or Hammet in him and much less Holmes, though Feluda himself is a Holmes devotee. He often speaks highly of Holmes in solving his cases and offers his unequivocal tribute, standing in front of the fictional 221B Baker Street address in the 1989 adventure *London e Feluda* [*Feluda in London*]. But the world inhabited by Feluda has little actual identification with that of Holmes. In fact, it is just the opposite. If there is a Holmesian sleuth in Bengali literature, it is Feluda's famous, homebred predecessor Byomkesh Bakshi, the fictional sleuth created by Bengali author Saradindu Bandopdhyay. Byomkesh, whose stories spanned the decades of the 1930s to 1960s, was a detective character molded in the classical sense, who would take up cases only if it tickled his imagination and power of rationalization. His world is full of quixotic intrigue, sexual jealousy and one-upmanship, seductive, coquettish women, cuckolded men, decadent patriarchs, weird fancies and involves a very sophisticated criminal mind who would give ample scope of minute, threadbare detection to Byomkesh.<sup>12</sup> Bandopadhyay had his fingers on typically Bengali waywardness, contemporary social history and mannerisms, cultural colloquialisms, and an appreciation of the full expanse of human manners and experience. Yet the stories share an almost open admiration of (and inspiration from) the narrative power of Conan Doyle as well as the professional ethics of Holmes. There are also significant similarities between late-Victorian London and Calcutta of the 1930s and 1940s, similarities which accentuate the Bakshi-Holmes connection. But then, unlike Holmes, Byomkesh was married and is often found balancing his professional commitments with concerns for his wife, symbolically and unwisely named Satyabati (which means "the bearer of truth").

Compared to Byomkesh, Feluda's world is very different. Comparisons were only natural, not least because one replaced the other literally. Sandip Ray recounts in *Ami ar Feluda* how in 1970, when Feluda was just four stories old and had only appeared on the pages of *Sandesh* to the evident delight of its readers, Ray was accosted by the editor of the Bengali literary magazine *Desh*. He persuaded Ray to submit a Feluda novella for the annual autumnal issue. It was not long after that Ray realized that the slot for a detective novel in that annual issue had been rendered vacant because of the death of Saradindu Bandopadhyay. So in the same publication and same slot in which Byomkesh had regaled his readers for years and had to be retired, Feluda's breakthrough novel appeared. After having turned professional detective and before the last big adventure, *Gangtoke Gandogol* [*Scandal in Gangtok*] is Feluda's first adventure in the 1967 outing *Badshahi Angti* [*The Emperor's Ring*]; Feluda developed skills

and habits that were going to be his hallmark throughout this series. Topshe is seen grown up too, by a few months, and has secured his place as the unopinioned narrator of his paternal cousin's thrilling adventures. Feluda takes the place of Byomkesh Bakshi, yes, but they are as different as chalk and cheese. Feluda's is a loveless and sexless universe full of a carefully calibrated, limited set of characters, a cyclical and identifiable pattern of clients and antagonists, set-piece thefts and murders, and a conscious, and at times even exasperating, determination not to overwhelm the self-imposed borders of permissibility in adolescent fictions. This is as far as one can get from the calabash-dangling, hooked-nosed, deerstalker-hatted, violin-playing, chamber-pacing, opium-sheltered Holmes.

In a long interview with *Cineaste* magazine, Ray makes his disapproval for the Bakshi-Holmes method evident when he talks about his own film, which was an adaptation of a Byomkesh novel:

Chiriakhana's [*The Zoo*] is a whodunit, and whodunits just don't make good films. I prefer the thriller form where you more or less know the villain from the beginning. The whodunit always has this ritual concluding scene where the detective goes into a rigamarole of how everything happened, and how he found the clues which led him to the criminal. It's a form that doesn't interest me very much. (Gupta 26)

No wonder that, in spite of his customary doffing of the hat to Holmes, Feluda remains decidedly unHolmesian. The heavy weight of Bakshi's Holmesian ways and climate were too evident for Ray to fall into the same trap. If Feluda admired Holmes and showed it, it was because his readers expected him to and not because he had anything to do with him. In that sense, Feluda's redoubtable popularity is not in spite of being unlike Holmes and Bakshi but precisely because of it.

Ray himself never eschews the "ritual" concluding scene in Feluda, but his genre borders on the thriller where mobility is as convincing a rite of passage as is the armchair application of reason and intuition. The detection of crime progresses with each page, with each step in the right direction for Feluda, while factoring in the confidence of his young readers. Here too, Feluda is neither Holmes nor Inspector Dupin, the latter famous for manipulating the reader while outwitting the mastermind of crime. If at all, he is more like young Jules Maigret of Georges Simenon—without any recognizable and change-resistant idiosyncrasy—his virtuous normalism sitting easy with his plentiful skills as one who hunts down the purveyors of crime. Incidentally, the only other detective writer apart from Holmes that we ever come across in the Feluda stories is French writer Émile Gaboriau, creator of the popular sleuth Monsieur Lecoq, often considered among the founding figures of the modern literary detective.<sup>13</sup>

One cannot proceed too far with Feluda's proclivity for Holmes and his delight in discovering Gaboriau in a barely-lit, suspenseful, noir setting of a suburban dilettante (*The Scandal of Ghurghutiya*). Instead, it may be worthwhile to look into the indigenous tradition of Bengali literature, either for adults or for children, which might have supplied the template for Feluda.

The juvenile thriller series particularly had a long and strong standing in the Bengali language. It debuts just after The Great War with the translations of Holmes' Baker Street neighbor Sexton Blake—the translations having been done by one Upendranath Bandopadhyay. Tapping into Blake's unmatched popularity in those decades, the stories were widely read and specially regaled high-school children in Calcutta and elsewhere. In less than two decades, there was further addition to this school. And it was by none other than Kuladaranjon Ray, Ray's granduncle. Like *Lamb's Tales of Shakespeare*, Kuladaranjon adapted Holmes for young adults in the years just after *Sandesh* stopped publication for the second time, i.e. 1932-1933. Satyajit Ray was twelve, and there is enough reason to believe that the stories, published in two volumes, stayed with him. Kuladaranjon Ray had successors in at least two other figures in the growing cult of adventure/detective literature for children or young adults in Bengali. The first of them is Hemendrakumar Roy, who gifted Bengali literature with the set-piece of the adventuring trio: the detective, his assistant, and the benign (bumbling) police inspector. He was followed by Niharranjan Gupta, who continued with the adventure-thriller mode with detective Kiriti and assistant Subroto. If one looks at them closely, one can see how Roy and Gupta are the real forerunners of Ray—in the boyish charm of their stories, their far-flung adventurism, their deep-seated moral coda, their happy cohabitation with the official legal framework, their use of new systems of scientific probing, and their keen intelligence (and not any extra-sensory perception) to which Feluda was a vocal votary. Chronologically speaking, on two sides of Byomkesh, then, the juvenile, boyish, thriller-inspired detective genre was the prevalent form. In this sense, Ray's Feluda was a return to popular tradition after Byomkesh rather than an invention of it. With one significant shift, Sharadindu Bandopadhyay, as Abhijit Gupta writes in a newspaper article, had made Byomkesh throw away “the rakish fedora and brier (of his predecessors), and instead clothed him in the more down-to-earth canonicals of the Bengali *bhadralok*” (Gupta, “Feluda Travels”). So while Feluda returned to the genre of the thriller, he was also conditioned with a post-Byomkesh sophistication, which betrayed his deep commitment to the *bhadralok* cultural sphere. This unflinching commitment to the *bhadralok* went, to a large extent, to fortify Feluda's subsequent popularity.

Also, given the effortless storytelling bravura of Ray, Feluda was unfailingly more readable. Added to the narrative, Ray's work, like that of his father and grandfather, was always lusciously illustrated. This faculty of using a distinct visual language to complement the text narrative, turning every work of fiction partly into a visually compelling graphic form, was the family's literary madeleine. Suffice it to say that the Rays together are also the finest family of illustrators India may have ever seen, if not also the most adorable writers of fictional forms close to children.

In spite of this recognizable ancestry, I would insist that Feluda still remains without a distinct generic precursor in the detective form. The translations of Holmes by his granduncle, the range of literature and adaptations penned by his own family's other talented writers, the rakish detectives of Roy and Gupta, Byomkesh and Sexton Blake, may have all played a part or two in the formation of Feluda and the constitution of its readership, but there are more than just generic loyalties involved here. Ray may also have in mind what I would call the *raconteur genre* of literature in Bengali. Here, I want to draw attention to the distinction of the name Felu-*da*, the suffix *da* being the Bengali convention to denote elder brother or one of similar familial order. One must note that none of the fictional detectives before Ray is referred to in similar terms. Felu-*da* in that sense is unique and yet not. Here Feluda draws lineage from the literary work of Premendra Mitra (and others, less gifted, like Narayan Gangopadhyay). Mitra, one of the leading figures in literature, cinema and the arts after Rabindranath Tagore, had introduced the fictional, recalcitrant, eponymous Ghana-*da* to the reading public in the 1940s. Ghana-*da* is the brotherly figure who talks about the world and his adventures from his home in Calcutta. In his self-advertised brio, in his globe-trotting provocation to insurgency, in his recalcitrance, Ghana-*da* is a kind of counter-historical, postcolonial figure who remains anonymous to history and yet causes its most incredible shifts. Ghana-*da* was distinctly Bengali in habits, especially in his obsessive gluttony and armchair fondness. But, at the same time, he is a man of keen knowledge and insightful intelligence, a scholar of the world, a talking head, collector of anecdotal ephemera, and a prodigious raconteur of tales.

Feluda has no claim to be seen as a narrator of counter-history, but otherwise Feluda's adventures closely resemble the Ghanada figure, except that Feluda is also physically agile and urbane. Otherwise, like Ghanada, Feluda is informed, conscious of his credentials, keenly observant of the world, and urges Topshe to be respectful of the topography, cartography, and history of a city, place or region that they are chasing their case in. But most importantly there is in Felu-*da* that

distinctly brotherly figure, just old enough to be more than a mere peer, but not old enough to be distant and forbearing like the father. The suffix *da* reinforces Felu-*da*'s next-door likeability, his spunky localism, without taking anything away from his professional accomplishments. Along with his intelligence, the combative, battle-ready, no-nonsense impudence of Felu-*da* marks him with the candor of a trustworthy friend, secured in his commitment and vigilant of human values while setting him apart from the orderly, proprietorial, governing *adulthood* of the police who work the hand of the State.

### Three Hypotheses

Having looked at the possible origins and formations of Feluda, both as a narrative motif customized for children and young adults as well as a figurative ombudsman, we may turn to the broader cultural strategies that may have played a role in the construction of the moral architecture of the stories. Having said that, it should be noted that the following propositions are contingent upon a thorough understanding of the constituent elements of the body of work that comprises the Feluda series. I have referred to the cultural strategies as a series of interlinked hypotheses because—to go back to psychoanalyst Adam Philips' opinion that opens this paper—they are not intrinsic to the *appeal* of the stories while at the same time are provoked by them.

#### *The return of the familial*

There are several stories (*The Suitcase*, *The Mystery of Royal Bengal*, *The Elephant God*, *A Calcutta Cemetery*, *Murder by the Sea*, "The Hidden Formula," "Napoleon's Letter") in which Topshe reiterates how Feluda is drawn into a case not because he is looking for livelihood but because the case appeals to him. Digging deeper, one can see how the regular roster of clientele would be unattractive to Feluda not because the nature of crime would be banal—after all most crimes in the entire series do not go beyond theft and murder—but because Feluda's fondness is for an older clientele desperately seeking salvation in a world outside time. In short, it is not the nature of the crime but the profile of the clientele that draws Feluda's attention. Feluda's clientele is mostly the gentry, part of a declining demography of a once-influential class, custodians of heirloom treasure and collectors of curios. They are barristers, advocates, businessmen. Most clients are unmarried or widowed or without any mention of a wife or women. They live in sprawling quarters in Calcutta's tony neighborhoods with a retinue of secretaries, helmsmen, gardeners, cooks, and bearers, who often substitute for the absence of a normative familial order. They open up to Feluda's interrogation only because they are confident of his compassion. One way of ensuring Feluda's sympathy for his clients is

to locate him accordingly. Historian Parimal Ghosh's unusual essay "Where Have All the 'Bhadraloks' Gone?" makes an interesting link between Feluda's location in the city and the ethic underlying his profession. Ghosh writes:

Until about 15 years ago I lived near Lake Market in south Calcutta, on Sardar Sankar Road, right where it makes a T-junction with Tara Road. The names of these ordinarily obscure roads and bylanes might not be entirely unknown to the literate Bengali because Satyajit Ray, the filmmaker, in his Feluda stories had used the same locale. Sidhujetha, the walking encyclopedia Feluda often consulted to find out about obscure facts, lived on Sardar Sankar Road. Feluda himself had his place, to begin with, on Tara Road; he later shifted further to the south, near the Rabindra Sarovar Lakes, to Rajani Sen Road. I have often wondered why Satyajit Ray had to situate his stories in that kind of locality. The answer could lie in the perceived ambience of the neighborhood, in the mid-1960s, when the stories first began to appear. There was a time when the area around Lake Market represented a certain urbanity. The place was developed around the time of the Second World War, and therefore did not have the weight of tradition behind it in the way north Calcutta had. Nor was it the classy upper class, select address that lay immediately to the south of Park Street. It had perhaps the right mix of openness and adequate middle class ease, without becoming the territory of the obviously rich. ...If Feluda represented a variation on the theme of rationality, mixed with a sense of *bhadralok* sophistication, then this was certainly the place for him. In no way could Satyajit have placed him, in the neighborhood of Bishop Lefroy Road<sup>14</sup>, or, in the given period, in Garpar.<sup>15</sup>(247)

The period when Feluda is thriving as a detective, the period between 1965 and 1990, saw a steep decline in Calcutta's metropolitan services. Ravaged by massive migration of goods and services and reverse migration of refugees, economic stagnation, political agitation, militant unionism, etc., the effortless cosmopolitanism the city was once famous for was now under severe constraint. The municipal services waned dramatically, leaving open signs of the city's festering disorder. On the other hand, as Ghosh points out, there were small neighborhoods of relative calm and quietude, which emitted a certain old world genteelness of spirit, in one of which Feluda himself resided. The narrative of Feluda's Calcutta stories often take shape of an intellectual and cultural correspondence between two genteel neighborhoods—one of his own and the other of his clients—while deliberately managing to bypass the festering city in between. There is, in those stories, a palpable sense of preoccupation with the lost world of the *bhadralok*. This is not to say that Feluda's clients are anachronistic, but they are surely exceptional, citizens of a past world untouched by the disquiet of

the time around them. In the world of these patriarchs, visible in full weight of their fading aristocracy, there is a clear hint of them being outside the normative code, oblivious to the prevalent civic currencies of transaction. Many of them happen to be specialists in one thing or the other, consummate in their taste of the finer things of life, and are benign and attentive to the needs of their minions. This is true, almost to the last syllable, of the clients outside Calcutta, most of whose primary occupation is to act as custodians of a past now irreversibly taken from them. They are often more fully assimilated to their checkered but proud family histories than to the world immediately outside them. In other words, the settings are often set-piece, dramatized to illustrate a forgotten order, crying out for sympathy and hungry for the appreciative gaze of the young narrator Topshe. Even Feluda's antagonists are more often than not resourceful, successful, and quite knowledgeable.

It is in this setting that the crime occurs; the object changes hand, is stolen, or is parted with. And that is how the case comes to Feluda. Most of Feluda's cases are linked to crimes that signify a pivotal moment of crisis in the familial archetype. Here, the custodianship of inheritance is the fraught question, thanks to a newer generation that is less appreciative of entitlements and hence likely to cause their misuse in a competitive climate of establishing relationship with the past. Together, they force us to identify a recurrent pattern of *return of the lost familial sign*, a member of family who returns after years, often in disguise, to claim or contradict normal channels of inheritance. In the way that they have managed to survive outside the immediate depredations of the zeitgeist, the patriarch individually or the extended family belong to a closed order. It is only natural that they would be more at home with the *private eye* to whom they can disclose the ways of their world and find sympathy for it rather than the police, who are more likely to treat them as equal to other citizens, an equality they have long unendorsed.

Through the agency of the sleuth, Ray takes a severe stand against lost or wayward childhood. Many of the purveyors of crime are after all victims of bad upbringing, absent childhood, or difficult father-son relationships. Feluda's intervention is hence not just professional but ecumenical, a moral imperative to find closure to family fissures and restore order to a *naturally edifying bhadrolok* familial order that reinforces the *dominant sign* of the family hegemon.

#### *The absence of the feminine*

This also brings us to a relatively less disguised cultural conditioning of the narrative—the deliberate abdication of the female subject. Leaving aside cameos of older women and female actors (*The*

*Bandits of Bombay*, *Triumph at Darjeeling*, *Murder at Kailash*, *Jehangir's Gold Coins* and *Gung-ho in Gosainpur*) who are incidental and nominal to the plot, there are only four stories in which women play any important part. In *The Diary of Doctor Munshi*, a woman is the criminal mastermind who, blinded by love for her miserable, good-for-nothing brother, plots to kill her psychiatrist husband; in *Shakuntala's Neckless*, a young woman partly solves the case; in *The Disappearance of Ambar Sen* another young woman plays a part in setting up a trap to test Feluda's skills; and in *The Curse of the Goddess* a very young girl gives away the clues to the crime, thanks to her word-play with her recently-deceased grandfather. It would be sweeping to claim that there are no women in Feluda. It is not so much about enumerating women in the stories as it is about the politics of configuring them in a certain way. There seems to be a customary, almost dogged insistence on a world under-populated by women as long as that world belongs to children and young boys. This question has troubled commentators, but the analysis hardly goes beyond a customary complaint of their absence. Ray was not unaware of this tendency but seemed somewhat helpless to bring any closure to his own construction of a world without the female subject. In a letter to friend and critic Saroj Bandopadhyaya, Ray wrote:

I want to end the letter on a personal note, I am in deep crisis with two of my favourite creations-Professor Sanku and Feluda. I have already used up all the staple of science fiction or fantasy in the stories of Sanku. So I have doubt about his future trajectory. The problem with Feluda is the same. Detective fiction written for young adults does have its limitations. Most crime elements are adult in nature and hence *have to be left out*. Sharadindubabu did not have to face this problem. I do. But these two are so close to me that I cannot think of abandoning them. (qtd. in Bandopadhyay96; emphasis added)

What is ironic is that Ray seems to equate the *adult* world with women, apparently inexplicably. Some have dragged Ray's discomfort with women in literature aimed at young adults to his Brahma legacy and the stoic misappropriation of female subjectivity to extremes of sacred, solipsistic purveyance of truthfulness and piety that is intrinsic to the reformist faith. In the *Cineaste* magazine interview quoted in this paper earlier, he refers to and plays down the possibility. He says:

I don't even know what being Brahma means. I stopped going to Brahma Semaj around the age of 14 or 15. I don't believe in organized religion anyway. Religion can only be on a personal level. I just find that the moral attitude I demonstrate is more interesting than any political attitude I could bring to my films. (Gupta 28)

One can also trace it to Ray's own childhood preoccupations with Jules Verne and H.G. Wells, Conan Doyle, and Mark Twain, as well as subscription to *Boy's Own Paper* as a young boy, as indicative of his entrenched discomfort and disregard for the quantum gravitas that women can import into a children's plot.

The prognosis perhaps lies in the possible reasons above and yet in something beyond them. It can be traced to the first hypothesis of the closed familial order in which women seem extraneous: women agency seen as *unnecessary* distraction. So keen is Ray to foreground a very specific clientele looking for closure in a family crisis that he is attentive to not leave possibilities of *dis*-closure, a possibility that women are inevitably accused of engendering in adult fiction. The boy-subject must remain under-informed about female agency to help him to retain his boy-agency. And that would be only a *normal* course of things. In an interview for the inaugural issue of a woman's magazine, when asked about women in Feluda, Ray said:

Well yes, maybe this is unconsciously a hereditary incidence, because my father and my grandfather also did not have girls in their stories.... The problem is if there is a young woman there might be a clash with Topse. Or her relation with Topse might give rise to certain complications. It's a structural problem. (*Sananda* 27)

The problem is indeed structural but not for Topshe. Just as Topshe is transfixed as an ageless, wide-eyed narrator of a closed set of gentrified clients, the female is equally transfixed in her absence. If there is a structure at all, it is the structure of inheritance in which the women do not fit easily. Ray's project of locating a new usefulness for adolescent fiction is restored by excluding women as naturally synonymous with the erotic and hence the phobic. They are absolved of any potential criminality (except one), guilt, or reparation only because they are absorbed and co-opted into the plenipotentiary of the same/similar *bhadrolok* fatherly hegemon.

Further, it seems the lack of agency of the female is a reinforcement of Feluda's potency. Feluda draws his ability to commit himself to the dangers of the world of crime only because he is unattached sexually and emotionally. His sexual potency finds release in his mobility. Psychoanalytically, his method of deep penetration into his work stands as the metaphor of his absent, actual libido. Again, his clients, mostly facing crises of inheritance, typical of patrilineal families, open themselves up to the sexless and "incorruptible" eye of the private detective (as much as they close it for the women), because only he can assert to have the deepest claims of penetration.

*The sacred agency of young in the bhadrolok sphere*

This incorruptibility of the privateeye, which resolves the “adult” question and reinforces the virtuousness of the boy-subject’s world, brings us to the final hypothesis. Crime, as Ray himself admitted, has a notoriously *adult* quality about it. Topshe, for example, is drawn into a world of apparent “crimes”—smoking, bribery (both indulged in by Feluda himself), animus, jealousy, anger, revenge, rivalry, corruption, filial guilt, and, of course, violent acts of murder. In spite of being drawn into them, Topshe remains defiantly pre-Lapsarian, umbilically fastened to the wide-eyedness of adolescence rather than drawn into the natural pulls of puberty that his participation in the roster of crimes would otherwise entail. He is geeky and yet unquestioning, and he expects a spontaneous membership in the world of crimes and “adults” without claiming any adult agency. It would not be, hence, entirely unjustified to recall Feluda to find a permanent home in Topshe’s topsy-turvy world of make-believe ageism, far from the realistic fictional universe of children that Ray sets out to decontaminate. If at all, Feluda ends up being the un-ageing, sexless role model for a permanent adolescence that is chained to forbearing, a-libidinal civility.

Hidden under their normalism and affable, *bhadrolok* endearment, Feluda and Topshe are integral to a problematic construction of boyhood, part of a larger project of consolidation of the family that was ushered under colonial modernity and something that Ray himself confesses to having been a bequest. So, while Ray abandons the institutionalization of the reformist faith, he is completely at home with its teleological purpose, which is to construct a virtuous *normalism* around the *bhadrolok* regimes of thought, action, and *seeing*. It is with this purpose that a reverse, almost puritanical ageism is factored into the stories in which Feluda and Topshe with conscience remain outside the disquiet of ageing while being confidently ensconced by it. In other words, in a series—which is not observant of topographies, human frailties, the banter of everyday life and the unquestionable efficacy of rationality—the decidedly utopian ageism must be seen as a political interpolation. By reconstituting the young adult detective genre from a range of possible and imminent sources, Ray had set out to complete a project which was in earnest undertaken by his father and grandfather. And this was to reinforce the *bhadrolok* aesthetic regime as *obvious* and hence *desirable*. Unlike Sukumar, whose literary oeuvre juxtaposes a rather complicated recognition of colonial, national, and social dualities, Ray’s followed a simple pattern. His genius as filmmaker had laid access to humanity’s endless riches, and Ray was not only triumphant in his probing but also remained a recondite aesthete, unwilling to easily commit himself to positions. That is precisely why

in his detective fiction for young adults, he remained so doggedly and sometimes helplessly committed to an aesthetic-political programming.

Needless to say this program, in its own way, has remained unbeaten. Feluda has managed to regale young men *and women* with unflinching success from its first appearance, and generations have passed it down to their children to be read and savored. The uncritical passage of Feluda's highly circumscribed universe across generations of young, urbane, middle-class Bengalis has helped normalize the gentrified world of the *bhadrolok* as the *desirable* world. It is unlikely that the original, colonial ideation of manufacturing an ideal-child subject, who would grow up (in an independent state) as a sexless, incorruptible adolescent and remain forever chained to a nameless authoring agency, will be subverted any time soon.

### Notes

1. I am indebted to Zehra Mehdi, Rajat Kanti Sur, Shakti Das Roy and Jagori Bandopadhyay for discussions and for making available to me rare materials referred to in this paper.

2. One of the leading British publications on printing and graphic arts, *Penrose's Pictorial Annual*, had published, between 1897 and 1912, twelve essays by Upendrakishore on half-tone printing and mass production of photography. The essays have recently been collected in Upendrakishore Raychowdhury's *Essays on Halftone Photography*.

3. The Bengali meaning of *Sandesh* refers to both news (derived from Hindustani *sandesa*) and the local sweetmeat—a name both suitable and easily recognizable for a magazine for children.

4. Beginning in the early-nineteenth century, there was a proliferation of periodicals and journals available to children, especially to those educated in the newly emerging modern modes of education. For a detailed account of the periodicals and their sphere of influence, see Satadru Sen, "A Juvenile Periphery: The Geographies of Literary Childhood in Colonial Bengal."

5. The Calcutta School Book Society (CSBS), founded in 1817, at the behest of both missionaries of Serampore, outside Calcutta, and leading reformists of the day, were the first to think systematically to "produce" literature for children in modern India. Their motto was "preparation, publication and cheap or gratuitous supply of works useful to schools and seminaries of learning". (Gupta 2014: pp 57) Until late in the colonial period, the CSBS primers provided the template for manufacturing the right educative climate for children's learning in Bengal. For a more detailed account of the Society, see Abhijit Gupta, "The Calcutta School-Book Society and the Production of Knowledge."

6. Titled *Hojoborolo*, this work remains hugely popular even today. One must note that the Alice-figure in the narrative is a young, pre-puberty boy.

7. Ray has written with delicious nuance about his childhood, his growing sphere of interests, the quirks of his extended family, and the sights and sounds of Calcutta that have remained ingrained in him to use extensively in a number of his stories. See Satyajit Ray's *Jokhon Choto Chilam [When I Was Young]*.

8. According to Sandip Ray, *Robertson's Ruby*, the last novel in the Feluda series, was written days before Ray was admitted, fatally, for medical care. He died soon after, on April 23, 1992.

9. This includes first and subsequent editions of all the thirty-five novels and novellas published from 1965 to the 1990s.

10. The first adaptation of Ray's Feluda novel of the same name.

11. Also a Feluda adaptation, the last one adapted for the screen by Ray himself. One must also add *Phatikchand* (1983) and *Goopy Bagha Phire Elo* (1991), both scripted by Ray (and filmed by his son Sandip Ray) and both with decisive parts for male children and young adults.

12. The Byomkesh stories, apart from being very widely read, have had a long association with the screen. Incidentally, the first Byomkesh story to have been adapted for screen was by Ray himself, as *The Zoo*, with Uttam Kumar, the legendary star of Bengali cinema, as Byomkesh Bakshi. This adaptation happens to be in the same year, 1967, in which Feluda's first full length adventure, *The Emperor's Ring*, was serialized.

13. There is more to Lecoq than one can hope to immediately understand. Lecoq's real-life inspiration was Eugène François Vidocq, the legendary French criminal turned sleuth. Vidocq also happened to be the inspiration for the first-ever Bengali detective. According to Sukumar Sen, a scholar of the genre, the formation of the police system in the first half of the nineteenth century, both in London (1829) and as its colonial headquarters in Calcutta, was to mark the real origins of modern detective writing. If in England, and just before that in France, the literary detective could be traced to the memoirs of Vidocq, then Poe and Gaboriau, the indigenous sleuth story could also be traced to first, the anonymously edited and Vidocq-inspired *Barkatullah's Department* (1855) with ATM Ramsay's *A Detective's Footsteps, Bengal* (1882); and Girishchandra Bose's *Sekaler Daroga Kahini* [*Tales of the Police of Yore*, 1893] followed suit. Incidentally, both Ramsay and Bose had served considerable years in the newly established police force in mid-nineteenth century Calcutta. However, once the Bengali fictional detective moved away from real case histories, inspiration came largely from Europe. One can make a case for the propensity to adapt European fiction, because few people outside the educated class would read any language outside Bengali, but the appeal of the genre far outnumbered the middle classes. The need to supply to a widening popular demand for detective stories superseded the need to be original, though the "foreign" stories had to be adequately localized. For a detailed understanding of the range of detective fiction in colonial Bengal and Bengali, see Sukumar Sen, *Krime Kahinir Kalkranti*

14. This was Ray's own neighborhood: a fashionable, old-world high-street, south of downtown Calcutta. It has to be clarified, however, that when Ray started writing his popular detective series, he was staying in Lake Temple Road, the same locality as the one the author mentions. He moved to his Bishop Lefroy Road address in 1970.

15. Ray's childhood address, a typical North Calcutta neighborhood, is also the fictional address of bestselling author Lalmohan Ganguly, a key and much-loved character in the Feluda series.

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