



'Intelligence beyond artificiality' - Postcolonial Robotics in Satyajit Ray's fiction

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Abstract

Etymologically, the word 'robot' has been derived from Czech word 'robota' that means 'drudgery' or 'servitude'. Thus, the invention of robots or its literary representation can't be discussed without referring to forceful labour or slavery, an important part of colonialism. Astonishingly, thus robot narratives in the west have always been dealt with a sense of domination and fear of overturn. In this literary milieu, it is interesting to note how Satyajit Ray, in his science fictions provides a postcolonial critique and alternative to the western treatment of machine. Keeping this in view, this paper discusses the postcolonial robotics of Satyajit Ray's fiction, primarily focusing on two of his works: "Anukul" and "Diary of a Space Traveller".

Keywords: Robotics, Postcolonialism, Narrative, Machine, servitude.



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The word 'robot', first used in Czech author Karel Čapek's play 'R.U.R.' (1921) can be seen as etymologically derived from the word 'robota', meaning 'drudgery' or 'servitude'. Thus robots were initially seen as "ciphers for oppressed workers, sometimes in complex ways" and gradually they were started "to be seen as a new race of beings." (Roberts 116)

One of the most significant writer of robot narratives, Issac Asimov, with John Campbell, editor of '*Astounding*', formulated what was known as 'three laws of robotics':

- "(1) a robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm;
- (2) a robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law;
- (3) a robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law." (Roberts 116-117)

What these three laws imply, however, more than its ethical dimension, is a sense of control, closely akin to the imperial objectives, late colonial tendencies during the Cold War milieu. As a result, the inception of law(s) is also surreptitiously meshed with a sense of fear of overturn, of robots exercising power on human beings.

Satyajit Ray's science fiction often feature the representation of what might be called as robots. But Ray's treatment of the robots and the relationship between the robot and its master demand critical attention. Postcolonial robotics, seen in Ray's science fiction, can essentially be called as based on empathy rather than prescriptive and restrictive rationality. Here, it seems the science of Ray's fiction tries to shed off its colonial garb and showcase an ethno-ethical science. Thus his '*kalpabigyan*', can feature what Debjani Sengupta calls, "a questioning of the paradigms of Neo-Enlightenment scientific principles and a critical understanding of humanism and science through the figure of the protean explorer/scientist." (Sengupta 74)

Ray's story "Anukul" delineates the relationship between Nikunjababu and his robot servant, Anukul. Ray does point out that initially, Nikunjababu was in need of a mechanical servant as elite people of his time were taking one, but as time proceeds, how the relationship between the two evolves, becomes an important part of the story. From the very beginning, Ray



seems to unsettle the human-machine division, as he presents Anukul as an android: "which meant that it looked exactly like an ordinary human being although it was really a machine." (Ray 643) Adam Roberts also says: "Readers of SF are organic, and the point of relevance of SF technology is that place where the machine intersects with the body." (Roberts 111) Ray presents a similar scenario, by making a Bengali android, Anukul who resembles human.

The way the proprietor of the Robot supply agency describes Anukul gives us a glimpse of his abilities and limitations. In contrast to the usual Robot narratives, Anukul seems not as a substitute to human labour. He has his limitations. He cannot cook and can't be sent for running errands outside. And what is astonishing, in Ray's narrative, is a sense of dignity and respect in the Robot: "...you must talk to him politely. He expects one to say "please" and " thank you." (Ray 643)

The etymological association of labour and slavery cannot be ignored when it comes to the word "robot." On the other hand, Robot is also someone possessing 'artificial' intelligence provided from outside, thereby implying its incapability to think on its own. Thus, from this light, western robotics can be seen as an imperial project in the field of technology. But here Ray seems to pen a postcolonial take on that project, by endowing the quality of dignity in it. The Bengali Robot, Anukul will not tolerate a slap or any kind of physical violence, it will take 'revenge':

"No, no. You'll find him troublesome only if you raise your hand. Our robots cannot stand physical assault.'

'There is no likelihood of that. But suppose someone gives him a slap. What will he do?'

'He will take revenge.'

'How?'

'He might use the middle finger of his right hand. He can give a high voltage electric shock with that finger.'

'Can that result in death?'

'Certainly..."' (Ray 644)

'Our robots' does not merely mean the robots of the Robot supply agency, but the robots of the post-independence region. Ray seems to ignite the fire of decolonial spirit here. This is even

more emphasized in the later part of the story. When Binay Pakrashi, an elite friend of Nikunjababu, who is so habituated to behave rudely with his robots, calls Anukul '*tui*' (rude way of calling someone in Bengali), instead of '*tumi*', he boldly replies: "If you are rude to me, old boy'...'I am going to be rude to you.' (Ray 645) The bold reply of Anukul accentuates a difference in the unquestioned master-servant relationship, that carries the burden of colonialism, especially the relationship between the colonial master and his subject.

The verbal reply of Anukul is also been given a physical manifestation on the part of Ray, when Nibaran Banerjee, uncle of Nikunjababu comes to stay with him. Ray has presented two different attitudes towards the robot, a "mechanical servant". Nibaran wants to treat Anukul like a slave, no better than that. His behavior towards Anukul, replicates the colonial master's behavior towards his subjects. On the other hand, there's a unique camaraderie between Nikunjababu and Anukul. The 'mechanical servant' slowly becomes a friend of Nikunjababu. Nibaran, exactly like a colonial master, values his ego over everything, when that's hurt by a 'mere servant' Anukul, couldn't help himself from slapping it, and paying with his life: "He got so angry at this that he gave me a slap. So I had to pay him back." (Ray 649) The violent death of Nibaran can also be called the death of Imperialism that 'robotifies' its people, creating subjects without independent intelligence, so that the mind remains 'artificial'.

However, similar 'intelligence' beyond artificiality is also seen in the very first novella of Shonku series: "Diary of a Space Traveller", that presents a tale of Space Travel by the scientist alongwith his robot, Bidhusekhar. Shonku initially discards any possibility of the robot thinking on its own: "He does not have the power to think independently." (Ray 9) But as the story proceeds, we see the robot is able to predict which planet is safe to land and which is not. Before landing in Mars, Bidhusekhar seems disinterested in visiting the planet. When asked why is he so afraid (again, a human quality), he answers:

"Denghah. Teril denghah.'
'Danger. Terrible Danger.'" (Ray 18)

Just like 'Anukul', in this tale as well, robots are not presented as a substitute of human labor. Therefore, even if Shonku has made 'Bidhusekhar', he is still in need of his human servant, Pralhad. As the story proceeds we see, both of them share a pretty friendly relationship, often joking on each other.

Thus, in treatment of Mechanical beings, Ray has presented a difference which can be called postcolonial. His postcolonial robots are not merely 'artificial', but intelligent. They have a sense of dignity. And whats more, the relationship between the master and the machine is not that of violence, control or order, but of empathy and compassion, the reflection of which we can see in the relationship between the scientist and Bidhusekhar, which is more like a father-son



relationship than anything else. A sense of uncanny fear often pervades Western robot narratives, that the robots might take over the human, as the creation of it is caused by imperial domination. But Ray's fiction, offers a postcolonial alternative, where human and machine can live in harmony, without prescriptive control.

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