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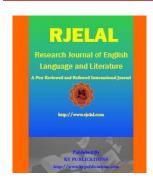
# MAGIC REALISM IN BENGALI CINEMA: SATYAJIT RAY'S *GOOPY GAYNE BAGHA BAYNE* IN PERSPECTIVE

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## ABSTRACT

Apart from the over rated grandeur of the Hindi film industry or the Bollywood, regional films from all over India throughout the years have constantly strived to form distinctive identities with their constant experimentation and incursion of various styles, motifs and genres, thus creating an unrestrained heritage of their own.

In the same way, based on a story by his grandfather Upendra Kishore Roychowdhury, in 1969, Bengali film maker Satyajit Ray created his National Award winning film *Goopy GayneBagha Bayne*. The film was the first of its kind in the history of Bengali cinema, with the neoteric influx of magical and fantastical elements in an otherwise realistic setting. The film was followed by a couple of sequels. *HirakRajarDeshe* was released after eleven years, in 1980 and *Goopy BaghaPhireElo* was released after twenty two years, in 1992. All of them followed the viable success of the first film.

It was indeed the bizarre, first time inclusion of the fantastical, "Bhooter raja" (The King of Ghosts) and other elements calibrated in a realistic backdrop, whichprompted the success of the films. Such an annexation of the miraculous with the real makes a study of the films through the scaffolds of magic realism, imperative.

This paper will do a textual analysis of the three movies employing the critical frameworks of magic realism. Primarily, characteristics of magic realism from Wendy B Faris' *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystificationof Narrative,* will be used. Salman Rushdie describes magic realism asa "co-mingling of the improbable and the mundane."This is precisely what the paper will analyse in the three eminent films of Ray that brought an innovative freshness in the annals of Bengali cinema.
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Given the national and international recognition of the Hindi film industry, it can be easily assumed that it is the largest and the most popular branch of Indian cinema. Over the years, Bollywood has preferred films that appeal to all segments of the audience. It was correctly believed that aiming for a broad spectrum would maximize box office revenues. However, apart from the unparalleled opulence of the films from Bollywood, regional films from all over India for over decades have persistently endeavoured to configure idiosyncratic identities with their constant investigation and

incursion of various styles, motifs and genres, thus creating an unrestrained legacy of their own.

In a similar fashion, Tollywood or the Bengali film industry has also marked its exceptionality with the production of varied films from an inimitable assortment of genres. The first cinema shows in Bengal have been dated to 1896-7, a few months after the first Indian showing of the Lumiere Brothers' Cinematographe in Bombay on 7 July 1896. An early pioneer was Hiralal Sen, who started the Royal Bioscope Company, and was making short films as early as in the 1900s (Gooptu). Following the legacy and the increasing popularity of Bengali films, Satyajit Ray, a film maker, fiction writer, publisher, illustrator, calligrapher, graphic designer and film critic, created an innovation in Tollywood during the 1950s.

Apart from his award winning productions of the Apu Trilogy and other films, Ray is also famous for his creation of the distinctive *Goopi-Bagha* series. Based on a story by his grandfather Upendra Kishore Roychowdhury, Ray created his National Award winning film *Goopy Gayne Bagha Bayne*, the first of the series. The film was the first of its kind in the history of Bengali cinema, with the neoteric influx of magical and fantastical elements in an otherwise realistic setting. The film was followed by a two sequels. *Hirak Rajar Deshe* was released after eleven years, in 1980 and *Goopy Bagha Phire Elo* was released after twenty two years, in 1992. All of them followed the practicable success of the first film.

It was indeed the inexplicable, first time inclusion of the fantastical, "Bhooter raja" (The King of Ghosts) and other elements attuned in a realistic backdrop, in *Goopy Gayne Bagha Bayne* which impelled the success of the films. Such an appropriation of the miraculous with the real makes a study of the films through the frameworks of Magic Realism, imperative.

Unlike the definition of magic realism in art, i.e., looking for mysterious things inherent in everyday reality, magic realism in films is perhaps best described by "amalgamation of reality and fantasy" (Hegerfeldt 25) or, as Lori Chamberlein puts it, cinema "that works both within and against the aesthetics of realism" (17). In other words, the basic

prerequisite is almost seamless coexistence of the supernatural and natural, the fantastic and dream-like visions cohabiting alongside everyday events.The most important feature of magic realism, for instance, is that its fiction brings together the seemingly opposed perspectives of a pragmatic, practical and tangible approach to reality and an acceptance of magic and superstition into the context of the same film (Bowers 3).

As a basis for investigating the nature and cultural work of magical realism, Wendy B Faris suggests five primary characteristics of the mode. First, the text, in this case a film, should contain an "irreducible element" of magic; second, the descriptions in magical realism detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world; third, the reader may experience some unsettling doubts in the effort to reconcile two contradictory understandings of events; fourth, the narrative merges different realms; and, finally, magic realism disturbs received ideas about time, space, and identity. "Irreducible element" is something that cannot be explained according to the laws of the universe as they have been formulated in empirically based discourse, that is, according to "logic, familiar knowledge, or received belief" (Faris 3).

Based on this understanding of magic realism, it can be noted that *Goopy Gayne Bagha Bayne,* the first in the series, begins with the realistic setting of rural Bengal and introduction of the character Goopy. He is a farmer's son with a passion to sing and conspicuous absence of talent. He gets banished by the king from the kingdom, as Goopy had the audacity to disturb the king in his slumber with his outrageous singing. Crestfallen, Goopy with a broken sitar arrives in a forest riding a donkey. It is there that he meets Bagha, a drummer from a neighbouring kingdom, who, like Goopy has been banished by his king for his vile drumming. The picturesque shots of Bengal, with the simplicity of ponds, trees, mud paths, thatched houses, stray goats and cows along with an imposing palace, brings in a sense of the reality of rural Bengal during the 1950s.

This customary sense of reality is infringed with a bizarre input of the dance of Ghosts and

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appearance of "Bhooter Raja" or the King of Ghosts. This eccentric advent of "Bhooter Raja" along with his conversation with Goopy-Bagha, shows the first instance of the presence of what Faris calls the "irreducible element" of magic. This world of the ghosts in various shapes and sizes perceived through their protracted dance sequence gives a glimpse of another phenomenal world, where the audience can express unsettling doubts. The six and a half minute ghost dance along with its imaginative vivacity of the visualization and execution make the sequence a visual and an aural delight. Ray combined live action, shadow puppets and Indian percussion instruments –ghatam, mridamgam, mursring and ganjra to create the entrancing sequence. This wonderful creation and presentation of the ghosts and their king "stands out as a clear elucidation of Ray's unmatched versatility – in terms of seamlessly traversing across genres, themes and tonalities" (Ghosh).

The second instance of the inclusion of a magical element is present as the "Bhooter Raja" grants three boons to Goopy and Bagha. A reading of Wendy B Faris' *Ordinary Enchantments,* would show that using myths and folklore is a common feature of magic realism works. The concept of three boons or wishes is a common motif used in certain folklore and myths from across the world. Whether it is the Irish myth of the leprechaun who has the magical power to grant three wishes or the Middle Eastern folktale of the Genie with the power to confer three wishes, the "Bhooter Raja" definitely, follows the mythical league. The blessings in *Goopy Gayne Bagha Bayne* for Goopy and Bagha consist of instant food and clothing, instant travel and an exquisite musical talent that can literally spellbind audiences. The key to all the magic is in two pairs of slippers.

The film also stresses on the mythical journey of a hero, or in this case, two heroes. Wearing the magic slippers, they arrive in the kingdom of Shundi. At a music contest held by the good king of Shundi, they enrapture the audiences and win the contest and are given positions as court musicians. Meanwhile, the seemingly evil king of Halla, twin brother of the king of Shundi, wants to declare a war. The king of Halla is not really a bad king but is drugged and controlled by the court magician Barfi. He works for the greedy and ambitious Prime Minister. With their magic powers, Goopy and Bagha avert the war and emerge as heroes. The twin brothers, kings of Shundi and Halla are reconciled and they offer to reward Goopy and Bagha with their daughters in marriage and their kingdoms.

Magic realism works as discussed before, question the prevailing sense of space, time and identity. Similarly, in the film *Goopy Gayne Bagha Bayne* the sense of time and space is distorted. Apart from the mention of the places like Shundi and Halla, actual locations of real places are not revealed. The reality of the spaces explored can be deemed as grotesque because people seem to freeze or become like an effigy when Goopy sings and Bagha plays his drums. The idea if time is also questioned when Goopy and Bagha are shown to travel miles almost instantaneously, teleport, with what seems like a click of a "high-five". With the banishment of both Goopy and Bagha their individual identities undergoes a crisis. However, the magical boons help both the characters forge new identities for themselves, more at a heightened level when they marry princesses and become kings. Once again, the presence of "Bhooter Raja" and his ensemble of ghosts question the idea of identity itself. Who are these ghosts? Why do they revel in a prolific dance sequence? How are the hierarchies in the ghost- world sorted, for one of them to become the king? How does the ghost king have powers to grant wishes? Question like this arise with the analysis of the film through the lenses of magic realism.

Verbal magic is also employed by magic realism texts, but in *Goopy Gayne Bagha Bayne* authentic words sustain magic within them. For example, the word "Shundi" which is actually the name of a place becomes an instance of verbal magic when the utterances of that word together by Goopy and Bagha teleports them. Names of food and clothes also operate in a similar mode when evoked by Goopy and Bagha.

Repetition as well as mirror reversals are employed in magic realism films. In *Goopy Gayne Bagha Bayne* repetition occurs mainly in the plot as

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the protagonists use their same power in similar situations. While in the kings' courts both in Halla and Shundi, Goopy and Bagha mesmerizes their audience in a repetitive manner. Both the scenes are almost identical. Mirror reversal occurs in the plot. Goopy was banished from his kingdom for his inability to sing and Bagha for his despicable drumming, however, ironically, after the three boons, the sweetness in their combined music helped them both become king themselves.

Magic realism texts or films often use magic against the established order, similarly, in *Goopy Gayne Bagha Bayne* the characters, Goopy and Bagha use magic from their three boons against the prevailing notion of realism in the film. All the other characters being a part of the realistic backdrop, thus forming the majority and the established order are completely unaware of the presence of magic.

At times, magic realism calls for a deep hybridity of cultures and reading experiences. However, this genre is uncommon and hardly used in Indian films let alone Bengali Movies. The term itself developed in the 1950s during which the film was already in the process of getting produced. Therefore, the merit of the film engaging the features of magic realism perhaps, without Ray's actual knowledge of it is quite dazzling and praise worthy. This kind of a film produced as early as the 1960s, marks the meritorious spirit of Bengali cinema and paves the way for colossal future potentials.

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