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The Post-humanistic Turmoil: A Critical Analysis of Satyajit Ray’s “The Diary of a Space Traveller”, “Professor Shonku and Robu”, “Bonku Babu’s Friend” and “Anukul”

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Abstract:

Indian literature in different regional languages is immensely rich in its manner of depicting various themes and portraying issues of the society, nation, and world. But it was beneficial only to the group of people knowing those specific languages i.e. Gujarati, Marathi, Bengali, etc. Hence, this research paper aims to deal with four Science-fiction short stories by Satyajit Ray: the first two short stories, “The Diary of a Space Traveller” and “Professor Shonku and Robu” from *The Diary of a Space Traveller and Other Stories* and the remaining two “Bonku Babu’s Friend” and “Anukul” from *The Collected Short Stories*. These stories are originally written in native Bengali language and later got translated into English. The main objective of this paper is to critically study these stories from the Post humanistic perspective as in the 21st century, people fall in the trap of science & technology i.e. Robotics, Artificial Intelligence, etc. Humanism believes in the central role of the human-being, while post-humanism challenges it. It is about the intersection of human, non-human and technology. This paper brings forth the unintended effects of technology and shows how

excessive use of technology and machines make a threat on human identity, how it overpowers and rules humans, and creates danger for the world as it is portrayed in the selected short-stories of Ray.

Keywords: Post-humanism, Science-fiction, Short Story, Robotics, Artificial intelligence, Satyajit Ray.

Introduction:

Literature is often considered to be the mirror of the society. Literature plays a huge role in reflecting the prevalent issues of the society, problems of the people to be discussed and how and why it is mandatory to talk about those issues to find possible solutions for the healthy upbringing of the generations. Indian literature in different regional languages is extremely rich in its manner of depicting various themes and portraying issues of society, nation, and the world, but the only question was that of its reach because it had been beneficial only to the group of people knowing that specific languages i.e. Gujarati, Marathi, Bengali etc. So, translations from that regional literature into the English language proved to be a boon for the readers. As a result, over the years, a lot of Indian regional literature has been translated into English to make it available worldwide.

Post-humanist themes are very rare and exceptional in Indian regional literature. Very few writers experimented their pens on such themes. Satyajit Ray (1921-1992) - A Bengali Writer, being one of them, is among the beginners of the Indian regional science-fictions. Ray's mention of robots, aliens, space travel, artificial intelligence, machines and other devices reveal the fact that his imagination is much ahead of his time. Satyajit Ray was a man of strong creative genius and uncommon imagination who created unforgettable

characters like Feluda, Professor Shonku and Uncle Tarini and has tons of short story collections to his name. Majority of his works are written in Bengali language and later got translated into English by Gopa Majumdar. In contemporary era, excessive use and development of science and technology blurs the margin line between humans and machines. People must remember the fact that there is no doubt about the benefits of the science and technology for making our day-to-day lives very easy and comfortable but we must also keep in mind the drawbacks it holds. To bring forth this issue of contemporary society, researcher has selected four science-fiction short-stories by Satyajit Ray and analyzed them from the post-humanistic perspectives as in the 21st century people fall in the trap of Science and Technology i.e. robotics, artificial intelligence etc.

Posthumanism or post-humanism, ('after humanism' or 'beyond humanism') is a philosophical and political movement as well as an emerging critical theory, responding to the presence of anthropocentrism in 21st-century that challenges the idea that humans are the only agents of the moral world. Basically, emerged in 20th century, it gained theoretical currency in wake of ecological consciousness and environmental campaigns around the globe. It explores what the world could look like if humans weren't the central characters. It is in the sheer contrast to the humanism which leads it to be called "Anti-humanism". Humanist philosophy believes in the central role of human beings. It emphasizes the role of human, human emotions, feelings to run this humanist world. It believes that human is the only creature on this earth that is most powerful and can control other aspects of the world. Then, there emerged another ideology named post-humanism that advocates the intersection of human beings with so many other aspects of the world like animals, environment, and non-human objects, and last but not the least science and technology.

The present Research paper deals with the four Science-fiction short-stories, selected from Satyajit Ray's two famous short-story collections. The first two short stories titled "The Diary of a Space Traveller" and "Professor Shonku and Robu" are collected in *The Diary of a Space Traveller & Other Stories* (2008), which is a collection of 12 short-stories. *The Diary of a Space Traveler & Other Stories* ("Byomjatrir Diary" in Bengali) by Ray was originally published in Bengali in 1961 in Sandesh, a magazine edited by Ray himself. It was later included in Ray's first collection of Shonku stories, *Professor Shonku*, in 1965. Later, it got translated into English by him and Gopa Majumdar which was first published as "*The Exploits of Professor Shonku: The Diary of a Space Traveller and Other Stories*" in 2004. The rest two stories "Bonku Babu's Friend" and "Anukul" are collected in *The Collected Short Stories* (2012), which is a Collection of 49 short stories. *The Collected Short Stories* was also originally published in the native Bengali language in the 1960s. It has been translated by Gopa Majumdar and first published into English in 2012.

The Post-Humanistic World in Satyajit Ray's Short Stories:

"The Diary of a Space Traveler," the first short story in the collection, has the Robot Bidhushekhara which is created by Professor Trilokeshwar Shonku. It is written in the diary form. Although, Ray's story does not directly focus on post-humanism as it is understood today, it foreshadows important themes that would later become central to post-human and transhumanist thought. These include the blurring of boundaries between human and non-human beings, the transformative role of advanced technology in enhancing human abilities, and the philosophical questions raised by space exploration and encounters with alien intelligence. Through these themes, "The Diary of a Space Traveller" quietly presents a post-human vision of the future, where humanity's role in the universe is both challenged and

redefined.

In the beginning only, Professor Shonku mentions that Bidhushekhar, the robot, does not have the power to think independently but sometimes he starts doing things he is not said to do (Ray 9). He says, “I have noticed before that when I make an object using all my scientific skill, often it starts doing things I had not bargained for. Sometimes it seems as if some unseen force is working with me, totally without my knowledge”. (Ray 10). This intersection shows the blurring line between human beings and machines in the modern world which is the main concern of post-humanism.

Later, when Shonku desires to go on space travel, he is trying to build a rocket. When he experiments with the chemicals, Bidhushekhar shook his head to stop him from using tantrum boropaxinate and then nodded in full agreement when he picked up vallosolica instead (Ray 10). Even he does the things, he was not designed for, like he can predict the future too, as when Shonku, Prahlad (his servant), Newton (Cat) and Bidhushekhar (Robot) went on a space travel, he warns about the danger on the Mars. “What danger? What are you afraid of?” Shonku went on. Robot answered, “Denghah. Teril denghah.” (Danger. Terrible danger) (Ray 18). This is how machines can guide the human. He reflects on how technology has already allowed humans to overcome the limitations of time and space, echoing post-human ideas that challenge traditional views of humanity.

According to Professor Shonku, what he can do is try to repeat the words he hears but sometimes it can go beyond the human control too. As mentioned, “He jumped to his feet, rushed to the control panel and yanked the handle that is supposed to put the rocket into reverse motion. Under its impact, all of us lost our balance and were soon rolling on the floor” (Ray 15). It shows that although Bidhushekhar is the creation of the scientist Professor

Shonku, it can surpass him too. Post-humanism believes that sometimes this force can make humans completely helpless as well. It is revealed when the rocket flies in motion without the control of Shonku in an Unspecified direction. It can bring forth one the most important post-human theme that humans may be supplanted or augmented by machines.

Post-humanism is not only about the machines; it considers anything that is non-human. On the Mars, there were creatures, which were not human, nor an animal or a fish. Yet they had something in common with all three. They are the examples of post-human creatures. This is one such encounter with the Martian civilization, which is depicted as a species with superior intellectual and technological capabilities. These alien species challenge the human-centric worldview, highlighting the possibility that humans may not be the pinnacle of evolution, which is a key post-human theme. Even on the other planet called 'Tafa', there were creatures like 'a giant ant'. This encounter questions the centrality of human existence.

By integrating advanced technology, robots, alien life forms, and philosophical musings on identity, evolution, and humanity, "The Diary of a Space Traveller" explores themes that resonate deeply with post-human ideas. Through encounters with non-human intelligence, Ray not only challenges the human-centric view of the universe but also imagines a future where humanity is no longer limited by its biological form, suggesting a world where the lines between human, machine, and alien life are increasingly blurred.

The second short story named, "Professor Shonku and Robu", collected in *The Diary of a Space Traveller & Other Stories*, features a robot called Robu created by Professor Shonku. From the letter of Professor Paumer to Shonku, it is clear that the robot, Professor Shonku has created is extraordinary. He can manage different languages like English and

Bengali and whichever skills are taught to him. Ray considered it to be an unbelievable invention by an Indian Scientist created with a minimum amount of Rs. 333.85. He can do mathematical calculations like additions, subtractions, multiplication and division in less than a second. Even he can solve any complex mathematical problem in less than ten seconds. That shows the blurring line between human beings and machines. The only thing that saves humanity is that it does not have emotions like men. He cannot feel joy, grief, or even anger and envy. Even he cannot do any task without teaching or commands (Ray 135-36). Shonku's robot highlights the agency of non-human beings, a central theme in post-humanism.

Further, the Scientist Professor Paumer works as a medium to add the post-human element to the rather mechanistic Robu by inserting extra gadgets into Robu's head that created a telepathic link between Professor Shonku's mind and that of Robu, which alerted him when Shonku was in danger and saved him from the robot of Professor Borgelt with whom he was left alone in the room. To clarify the point, it means that while Shonku's robot is capable of saving his creator's life, Borgelt's robot had not that kind of feelings whatsoever. They are like the "man created by man". But at the end of the story, Bergelt points out that his robot is very well in control of his master, because, of course he can somehow function like normal human being, but only he can fix it whenever malfunctions and works with human commands only. Borgelt said, "A robot ought to remain a robot. I mean, it should simply be a machine, no more" (Ray 155). This statement shows the concern of Ray with the humanity and fear of the controlling capability of machines and technology that can augment the human existence. Ray has very aptly pointed out the agency and limitations of the post-human in the last lines of the narrative.

At the end of the story, Shonku asked, "Now do you see why my Robu didn't tell us

Borgelt's name in Paumer's house? How could he, when the person asking him wasn't the real borgelt?" Neither Paumer nor Shonku realized that they were speaking to a mechanized look-alike. But Robu knew it "perhaps it takes one machine to know another." (Ray 156). It reminds of the boxes we have to put with the captcha, because it is AI generated and it can identify the difference between human and robots. Thus, Ray's imagination can be called way more futuristic that it has resemblance with the modern world of science and technology.

The third short story, "Bonku Babu's Friend", collected in *The Collected Short Stories* by Ray, features a post-human agency, an alien named 'Ang', which came from the Planet Craneus through an object like a giant glass bowl. Bonku Babu is a teacher of geography and Bengali at the Kankurgachhi Primary School. The story revolves around the strange encounter of a small-town schoolteacher Bonku Babu with an extraterrestrial being named Ang, an alien which has a head like a plain, smooth ball and the body of a weird creature that was supposed to go to Pluto (Ray 8). Ang said, "I am Ang, From the Planet Craneus. A far superior being than man" (Ray 9).

When Bonku Babu laughs at it, he says that he knows 14,000 languages. That is much more than the human capacity. Even knows thirty-one languages spoken on planets outside of our system. He is 833 years old. He controls the environment of Bonku Babu with a strange little thing in his hand. Even he could make him visit to the North Pole and also knew his wish to visit Brazil without even mentioning. After reflecting his powers, he asks Bonku, "Now do you believe that we are superior?" (Ray 12) This reflects any non-human's surpassing of human agency with its superior powers.

There is also a mention of Satellite like Khotka or Phoshka - a Russian Satellite, supposed to be going around the earth at the height of 400 miles that can provide a lot of

valuable information to scientists. Ramkanai calls it a human achievement. This is the reflection of how science and technology has allowed humans to overcome the limitations of Space and Time, echoing the post-human ideas and notion of challenging the traditional identity of being a human. It shows the post-human aspects in the story like blurring the line between human and any non-human agency, superiority of non-human existence.

“Anukul”, a fascinating short story by Satyajit Ray, collected in *The Collected Short Stories*, features a robot named “Anukul”. It deals with the interaction between humans and an artificial humanoid robot, addressing themes that resonate with post-humanism. The narrative explores the relationship between humans and machines, blurring the boundaries between creators and created and questioning traditional notions of identity, agency, and morality.

Anukul is a robot owned by Nikunja Babu and supplied by a robot supplying agency in Choweinghee. Anukul is an android robot which looks exactly like an ordinary human being, although it is really a machine of the age of 22. He can speak just like a man. He can do all the household chores a normal servant can do like washing, cleaning. He can also make the beds; make tea, open doors and windows etc. The only thing he does not know is to cook. It reflects the very characteristic of post-humanism that “He expects one to say ‘please’ and ‘thank you’. A person must talk to him politely” (Ray 643).

Nikunja Babu mentions, “You’ll find him troublesome only if you raise your hand. Our robots cannot stand physical assault” (Ray 644). He can give a high-voltage electric shock with his finger if not treated politely.

Anukul, the humanoid robot, is portrayed as more than a mechanical servant; he exhibits intelligence, adaptability, and even ethical decision-making capabilities. He is

logical enough to link two tasks perfectly. He can very well understand the situations and needs of his master and can do accordingly. He can do the logical thinking as well. He seems to know a lot about sports, cinema, theatre, literature. He seems to be superior than his master in many things. Anukul's ability to converse naturally and respond to situations with apparent emotional nuance challenges the distinction between humans and machines. This reflects the post-humanist idea that technology can transcend its status as a mere tool. This characteristic of Anukul questions the mere existence of human as a central character of the earth and poses a threat on the humanity and human identity.

The story showcases the destructive sides of technology too. In the end when Nikunja Babu's uncle comes to his house, he warns him about the robot and makes him aware to behave politely with him. This incident shows the control of machine over human being when his uncle says, "Do I have to act according to his likes and dislikes?" (Ray 647).

However, one day, his uncle could not control his anger and did not behave politely with Anukul. Anukul said,

"Your uncle was standing near the window and singing a Tagore song about the rain. He got some the words wrong. So, I felt obliged to correct him. He got so angry at this that he gave me a slap. So, I had to pay him back." (Ray 649).

Anukul gave him a high-voltage shock and he died. This is the limitation of technology and also a negative impact it can have on human existence. Even it has the strong capacity to question the human identity and humanity.

Conclusion:

Indeed, Satyajit Ray's short stories capture an essence of a science-fiction. All the

selected short stories depict different kinds of post-human elements but one common thing is that they deal with any kind of non-human existence. Whether to be robots named Bidhushekhhar in “The Diary of a Space Traveller”, Anukul in “Anukul”, Robu in “Professor Shonku and Robu” or an alien named Ang in “Bonku Babu’s Friend”, they all depict post-human conditions perfectly. These short-stories show post-humanistic turmoil created by technology. It is not the matter of question that we are benefited by the technical world but at the same time, it poses the threat on human identity, humanity and its existence too, which is evident from the critical analysis of these short-stories. The destructive effects of excessive leaning on technology and machines show the overpowering control of machines on humans and how it can create danger for the world. It can be concluded that technology must be a ‘Server’ not the ‘Controller’, for the betterment of human-kind.

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