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Tales Across Time: Understanding Hybridity in Children's Fantasy Fictions from the Bengal Renaissance

Sircar, S. (Trans. & Annot.). (2018). *Fantasy fictions from the Bengal Renaissance: Abanindranath Tagore,* The Make-Believe Prince – *Gaganendranath Tagore,* Toddy-Cat the Bold. Oxford University Press.

Abstract:

This review article discusses the book *Fantasy Fictions from the Bengal Renaissance: Abanindranath Tagore,* The Make-Believe Prince – *Gaganendranath Tagore,* Toddy-Cat the Bold, translated and annotated by Sanjay Sincar (2018). The author of the paper situates the Tagore brothers' stories in the context of Indian folklore and literary traditions, highlighting Sircar's research skills as expressed in his meticulous commentaries and analytical thoroughness. She also notes that the work combines translation with comparative studies and elaborates on these issues in a detailed discussion of the monograph's contents. In her opinion, the reviewed book confirms the validity of the study of vernacular works for children and may provide an impetus for further research focused on Indian works beyond the traditional literary canon.

Key words:

Abanindranath Tagore, Bengal, children's literature, fantasy, folklore, Gaganendranath Tagore, India, Sanjay Sircar

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Opowieści ponad czasem. Pojmowanie hybrydyczności w dziecięcych opowieściach fantastycznych z okresu bengalskiego renesansu

Abstrakt:

W artykule recenzyjnym omówiono książkę *Fantasy Fictions from the Bengal Renaissance: Abanindranath Tagore,* The Make-Believe Prince – *Gaganendranath Tagore,* Toddy-Cat the Bold [Opowieści fantastyczne z okresu bengalskiego renesansu. *The Make-Believe Prince* Abanindranatha Tagore – *Toddy-Cat the Bold* Gaganendranatha Tagore] w przekładzie i z przypisami Sanjaya Sincara (2018). Autorka artykułu rozpatruje opowiadania braci Tagore w kontekście indyjskiego folkloru i tamtejszych tradycji literackich, podkreślając umiejętności badawcze Sircara wyrażające się w jego drobiazgowych komentarzach i analitycznej dokładności. Zauważa również, że książka łączy przekład z badaniami porównawczymi, i rozwija te zagadnienia w szczegółowym omówieniu zawartości monografii. Jej zdaniem, recenzowana pozycja potwierdza zasadność prowadzenia studiów nad wernakularną twórczością dla dzieci i może stanowić impuls do dalszych badań nad indyjskimi utworami spoza tradycyjnego kanonu literackiego.

Słowa kluczowe:

Abanindranath Tagore, Bengal, literatura dziecięca, fantastyka, folklor, Gaganendranath Tagore, Indie, Sanjay Sircar

Although folklore and children's literature studies have been marginalised areas of interest in the Indian academia, the last few years have seen a surge in collections of folktales translated into English and a rising popularity of books for young people. *Fantasy Fictions from the Bengal Renaissance: Abanindranath Tagore,* The Make-Believe Prince – *Gaganendranath Tagore,* Toddy-Cat the Bold, translated and annotated by Sanjay Sircar (2018), is remarkable in covering both fields. It presents two fables: *Kheerer Putul*, rendered in its written form by Abanindranath Tagore, translated as *The Make-Believe Prince*, and *Bhondaṛ Bahadur* by Gaganendranath Tagore, translated as *Toddy-Cat the Bold*. In addition to Sircar's detailed comments, bibliography, and appendices, the volume contains *Foreword* by the eminent theorist of children's literature, Peter Hunt (Cardiff University, UK), and the first text is accompanied by nine illustrations taken from the original drawings and paintings of Abanindranath, printed in the late 1890s and early 1910s.

Sircar, a scholar in the field of children's literature and fantasy fiction, is well known for his interest in the genre and stylistics as well as in marginal literary and cultural traditions of the 19th century. His latest book is an excellent translation and has been minutely researched. It is a valuable addition not only to translations of the vernacular tales into English, but also to folklore studies, particularly Indian folkloristics. The work may be considered significant as it combines translation with the comparative study of the folktale tradition and the 19th-century Anglo-Western conventions of fantasy fiction – especially the *Kunstmaerchen* and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll (1865/1998; it is notable that the interest of Bengali academicians in Victorian literature relates mostly to the flowering of the hybrid literary tradition in Calcutta, which happened due to the diffusion of the English language and literature). The text seems to confirm the observations of Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn (2012), editors of *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, that there is a consistent interest in fantasy, from the Gothic narratives of the 19th century to the supernatural and dystopian representations of the 21st-century popular literature. "[F]rom Mrs Radcliffe to Ms Rowling" (p. i) – as the volume's opening note states – the fantastic has become a major attraction for readers and publishing houses.

Sircar (2018, pp. 338) provides an introduction to the authors, two key figures of the Indian modern art movement, in one of the appendices. Abanindranath Tagore (1871–1951) was one of the most prominent artists in British India, who supported traditional values in Indian art and went on to create the Indian Society of Oriental Art and subsequently established the Bengal School of Art. As the recognised head of the Modern Bengali Painting School, he encouraged the evolution towards Primitivism and Modernism of many young painters. His artistic style grew out of his experimentation with the Mughal miniatures, Chinese and Japanese calligraphic styles as well as through suggestions from *The Arabian Nights* and Pre-Raphaelite imagery. He checked the growing imitation of Western art forms and spearheaded the modernisation of traditional Indian art. Abanindranath succeeded in modernising Mughal and Rajput paintings that eventually gave rise to modern Indian painting. He also wrote on a variety of subjects, to mention folklore, memoirs, art, and literary works – aside from *Kheerer Putul*, he has written children's stories such as *Buṛo Angla* and *Raj Kahini*. *Kheerer Putul* is special in that it is a synthesis of several elements of Calcutta's real life and personal history, such as his grandfather's merchant fleet that operated on the seas towards China and the East.

Gaganendranath Tagore (1867–1938), Abanindranath Tagore's older brother, was a master painter, a prominent Modernist who introduced Cubism

to India. He was familiar with traditional Indian art and was an illustrator and satiric cartoonist, much involved in photography and theatre (Mondal, 2021, pp. 35–36). *Bhondar̦ Bahadur*, his adaptation of an English fantasy work into a re-worked text of Bengali dream-fantasy, renders its status; it is not a mere imitation but a new creation. Sircar strives to convince his readers of the importance of this feat as a hybrid exchange between India and the Empire. *Bhondar̦ Bahadur* is Gaganendranath's only literary work, and this makes it even more remarkable for the quality of his inventiveness.

Both authors are in part inheritors and creators of the Bengal Renaissance literature and culture, and both *Kheerer Putul* and *Bhondar̦ Bahadur*, published in 1896 and 1926, respectively, are considered classic works of fantasy fiction in West Bengal and Bangladesh. However, they are classics of a particular "Little Tradition,"[1] according to Sircar (2018, p. xiii). He focuses on the status of these stories as part of inaugurating a new Bengali literature, "characterized by a marked eclecticism, moving away not just from traditional literary genres but from older, more taken-for-granted convictions" (p. xvii), which were representations of an entrenched society and culture. This new literature emerges as a consequence of the dilution of orthodox religious and cultural beliefs in the 19th-century metropolitan Calcutta. He marks this tradition as an alternative to high upper-class print literature of the élite, a growing body of "less prestigious literatures circulating in print with differentiated readerships, works composed in various 'style heights' and registers, and so on" (p. xvii).

The author strives to underline that these tales are not high-canonical literature, emphasising that canon formation is also mutable over time. Sircar (2018) envisions them to be an essential part of academic research and not merely "an adjunct to a 'significant' and 'important' canon" and acknowledges "that these texts deserve all the various sorts of analysis that more mainstream canonical texts are given" (p. xix) – as justified by the emergence of children's literature as an important area of research from the 1970s to 1980s in the West. His study shows how these Bengali stories cross generic boundaries – for example, by not only marking a connection of *The Make-Believe Prince* to the

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[1] Sircar (2018) distinguishes between the "Great Tradition" and the "Little Tradition" when it comes to the literary traditions in India and focuses his attention on the status of the two texts as part of the latter. These tales emerge as "recreational literature, specifically for children," coming out of the Bengal Renaissance (p. xiii). He considers *Kheerer Putul* as "a playful variation, *Spielform*, of a woman's ritual tale," based on the robust and irreverent humour of the folktale (p. xviii); the "two texts are not high-canonical literature […]; they are not 'difficult'; […] not solemn or hortatory. They are fun" (p. xix). Yet, Sircar emphasises their status of classics.

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"universal myth-kitty," but also recognising it as a reworking of the *Kunstmae-rchen* into a "Bengal form" of the Indic Aarne-Thompson folktale type AT 459 and into a "women's folk-myth" (Hunt, 2018, p. xi).

The first part of the book contains the translation of *Kheerer Putul* as *The Make-Believe Prince*. It is a story of a King who favours his second Queen: this is reflected in her rich house full of gold ornaments, a gold bed, and a gold saree. The Elder Queen is neglected, and her fallen fortunes are reflected in her poverty. She lives in a hovel in poor conditions, waiting for the King's once-a year-visit. The reversal of fortune occurs when the King sets out on a journey and brings back the gifts both the Queens have requested. On the one hand, the rich jewellery and saree gifted to the favoured one fall short of her expectations. On the other hand, the neglected Queen has asked the King for a Monkey which seems a strange request, but her choice is vindicated when the animal helps her regain her rightful place as the Elder Queen. The Monkey is a trickster who acts as the *deus ex machina* that rewards the Elder Queen for her patience and loving devotion to the King. This is more a folktale that contains humorous elements, including the animal's clever manipulation of Shashthi, the goddess of fertility and protector of children, to give the neglected Queen a son from among the children she has at home. The story ends on an auspicious note: a wedding journey, journey songs, and the wedding of the newly gifted son of the King and the returned-to-favour Elder Queen.

Kheerer Putul, which may be literally translated as "The Sweet-Dough Boy," is an adaptation of one of *bratakathas*, stories mostly based on the Puranas, which is a huge corpus of Sanskrit literature. There are always local variations of these tales involving the process of domestication and adaptation into the vernacular. As rewritten stories, they are related to several cross-regional and cross-cultural influences, all of which Sircar seeks to understand and record. In creating a framework for the study of folk literature, Western specialists often treat *bratakathas* as fables, the preoccupation of which "tends to be a short, metaphoric exploration of power relation that provides listeners with a moral or ethical example" (Zipes, 2012, p. 13). This may be true to some degree, especially due to the resemblance with the beast-fable cycles. However, one of Sircar's singular achievements has been elevating the *katha* as a re-retelling of a simple exemplary tale where the inclusion of the divine helps to transcend the story beyond material boundaries. To put it differently, the elements of fantasy are remarkable, "[f]antasy fiction is set in another world – or a different version of this world – in which magic and the supernatural are treated as realities" (Bramwell, 2005, p. 141). The impossible becomes possible through a magical concoction of faith, goodness, and

the irrational. In the case *of Kheerer Putul*, all of this is embellished with elements of folklore, and the story becomes a tale of fantasy or magic, a *Kunstmaerchen*.

The story retold by Abanindranath Tagore is understood as AT 459, a type that involves supernatural elements and the enchantment of a husband or a wife. It has been reworked into several Bengali versions, as is common with folk narratives. Sircar (2018), in his notes, has included the extant Indian variants of AT 459, which are essentially recreated from the Puranic, *mangal-kavya*, and *bratakatha* material. Such a material is provided in the "Annotated Bibliography," which also includes an exhaustive archive of Iranian and Palestinian versions of AT 459, illustrations and translations of the tale into other Indian languages as well as into English and into other European languages. Also, several editions of *Kheerer Putul* in Bengali are listed along with a chronologically arranged list of dramatisations of the story (pp. 153–173).

Interestingly, the genre of folk stories in Bengali is quite well structured, as maintained in *Folk Tales of West Bengal* by Swapna Dutta (2009), which not only recounts tales about kings and queens, magic and mysteries, vices and virtues, but also provides a categorisation different from the Aarne-Thompson, more specific to the vernacular and regional tale. According to her, folktales in Bengal can be divided into four genres: *rupakathas* (stories about love and adventure, and the victory of good over evil); *upakathas* (about animals and their relationship with human beings); *bratakathas* (about rituals and vratas, for example religious domestic ceremonies); *rasakathas* (comprising stories of humour and amusement). In this sense, one understands what Andrew Lang (1884) meant when he observed that "folklore collects and compares the similar but immaterial relics of old races, the surviving superstitions and stories, the ideas which are in our time but not of it" (p. 11).

The extensive notes compiled by Sircar (2018, pp. 152–153) demonstrate a formidable research into metaphorical and allegorical tropes in the stories, relating them to all possible combinations of the folktale types and motifs, such as: "modest request," "childlessness," "jealous wife," "extraordinary poison," "jealous wife […] murders […] her rival," "child born in answer to prayer," punishment of the out-of-favour beloved Queen and rewards for the returned-to-favour neglected Queen, and so on. The irregular elements of folktales are often questioned, as is the relevance of traditional stories for children due to their "remarkable unpleasantness and crudity" (Hunt, 2001, p. 275). The vulgar treatment of the sacred or the ideal may be related to the subversive nature of folktales, as can be seen in the treatment of the goddess Shashthi by the

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Monkey in *Kheerer Putul*. To relate the story to children, the crude element is muted, sufficing with the animal trapping Shashthi into a position where she is forced to grant the Monkey a child for the Elder Queen.

It is worth devoting a paragraph to the minutiae of the scholar's studies. For example, in the story, there are references to thirteen rivers and seven seas and Sircar (2018, pp. 98–99) provides comprehensive notes regarding the use of these numbers (and also of the number eight) as of significance in changing the contexts and in other tales, from other places. The quality of rice given to those in favour or as a reward is detailed and the possible varieties of rice are also described through meticulous research. There is an interesting aside as Sircar delves into the history of Pataliputra, the capital of Magadha, and connects the stem 'patali,' among others, to the word for a variety of rice, *patali* (pp. 125–126). The word 'cat' has received a great deal of attention too, as Sircar describes the many varieties of animals that are referred to as cats in the story, such as the mongoose and the otter (pp. 133–134). In *Bhondaṛ Bahadur*, he again takes care to show how extensive his academic pursuit is by omitting no detail regarding the species of animals that are described in the text, by indicating their characteristic features, habitats, and synonyms known then and now in Bengal and the surrounding regions, including Odisha and Bihar (pp. 235–256).

The second part of *Fantasy Fictions…* is the annotated translation of *Bhondaṛ Bahadur* into English as *Toddy-Cat the Bold*. Sircar (2018) outlines the history of the tale as a result of "a [s]hared [s]et of [c]hildhood [i]maginings as a [s]ource" (p. xx), referring to the participation of the Tagore family, including children, in the creation of a handwritten children's magazine called *Deyala*, in which "flowed verses, stories, essays and illustrated puzzles" (p. 178) that were bound together and had a cover graced with an illustration by Abanindranath. This household magazine became the source of the printed *Annual Basumati*, issued in 1926 before the annual autumn festival of Durga Puja.

There is an unnamed narrator in the story, a home that becomes fantastical in the dream, with a hollow pillar which becomes the imaginative site of action. The beginning is *Alice*-like, with the narrator going off into a dream after a protracted ritual of dozing, restlessness, inaction, and longings for getting out of the ordinary and the routine. The central event is a kidnapping: young Nichua, son of the titular toddy-cat – a civet – Bhondaṛ Bahadur, has been taken away by the Two-Faced Rakshasa of the Chutupalu Jungle, who had appeared in a catlike form. The entire army and official machinery of the Royal Bhondaṛ Bahadur are steered into action in the rescue mode and the kidnapper, the Two-Faced Rakshasa, is marked as the villain – the reason for the journey through the dreamland (the preoccupation with lost children and

the invocation of divine blessings for their safety seem to be a major concern of the Tagores' tales).

This journey involves a fantastic adventure with anthropomorphic creatures, robotic palm-leaf sentries, a railway accident, a runaway railway line, and a magical item, Tal-Betal-siddha Lathi or a Ghoulie-Ghostie Staff that moves on its own. There are also the *Jaté-buṛi*, the Old Mother, and a radiantly beautiful maiden with a cat who rewards the protagonists' efforts and ends their quest – by showing them that the lost children are safe and rewarding them with riches for being such fine warriors. Nichua, the original object of the search, has been made the High King, with the blessings of the Old Mother. The recalling of the maid and the Old Mother seeks to establish these female figures as saviours and protectors of children. The story weaves across a fantastic land of riches spread over an endless landscape, just as in *Kheerer Putul*. In these tales, the richness is clearly associated with the presence of goodness and divinity. This rich land appears supernatural and unreal, manifested through magic, yet it is also represented as being attainable through some magical spell or for a character with supernatural power or an extraordinary gift.

As a prelude to the translated text, Sircar (2018) has provided exhaustive details on the origin of the story. He describes it as "a work of fantasy 'in the manner of Lewis Carroll,' which creatively adapts the *Alice* template to Bengal" (pp. 178–179). The scholar provides an in-depth analysis of the tale, looking at the two texts comparatively and seeking the correspondences, variations, and hybrid features. The template of Tagore's story is Carrollean: "there-and-back-again quest journeys" (p. 179), dreaming while falling asleep at home, and the gradual introduction of fantasy elements. However, according to Sircar, the author has created a cross-cultural literary adaptation that is a meritorious synthesis of nonsense fantasy and folktale. The story contains elements of the "*Kunstmaerchen* […], mock-heroic romance, epic, and mythic touches"– and becomes a "new fairy tale" (p. 179) with modern supernatural figures in a creative appropriation and adaptation of Carroll's dream convention and quest narrative. Gaganendranath exploits the dream-journey structure and makes "gendered and generic changes to it, […] and explores a theme that owes nothing at all to *Alice*," so *Bhondaṛ Bahadur* becomes a Bengali hybrid of *Alice* and other sources, exhibiting "entirely different motivations, […] different sort of quests, with different feeling-tones, patterns, goals and themes" (p. 180).

In the subsequent sections, Sircar (2018) has provided detailed notes on the similarities and departures from *Alice*. He explains the dream convention as a device continuing from classical and medieval narratives that "allows the impossibilities typical of fantasy fiction to be accepted unquestionably from the

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very start of the narrative" (p. 180) and helps the reader to get "used to fantasy features" and "build up expectation" (p. 182), which is so important for reading with curiosity. In tracing these details, he exhibits a very clear understanding of both the texts and their literary devices and conventions. There are, for instance, segments on the Carroll-derived characters: the Two-Faced Rakshasa of the Chutupalu Jungle is based on the Gryphon and the Unicorn; the card and chess figures are echoed in the toy figures like Bakmal's wooden horse and the clay swans that 'go to school'; the 'mad' characters such as the Mad Hatter and the Queen of Hearts are reflected in the Mad Clock and the Mad King (p. 186–190). Sircar observes that Gaganendranath's equivalents to Carroll's card/chess people, 'mad' characters, and monsters seem to be devoid of the kind of personalities that Carroll imbues his characters with, including their linguistic dexterity that balances nonsense and humour as resistance to authority.

Sircar (2018) compares the two cultural backgrounds, showing how "[t]ransposing the English countryside of the template to Bengal automatically brings with it social/cultural transposition," as the dreamlands of the texts "reflect/refract" (p. 190) their respective social conventions and hierarchies and satirise them. Alan Dundes (2007) finds that "[f]olklore is one way for both adults and children to deal with the crucial problems in their lives…. In fact, if one collects the folklore of a people and then does a content analysis of that folklore, one is very likely to be able to delineate the principal topics of crisis and anxiety among that people" (p. 275). This also applies to both original and folklore-inspired literary narratives: while Alice has to contend with a despotic and temperamental political authoritarianism, the narrator of *Toddy-Cat the Bold* has to balance the changing patterns of a traditional Bengali society due to the introduction of colonial modernity. The ceremony of a morning and afternoon tea, the hatted, suited, and booted government officials, and the new breed of aristocrats advancing under the British are parodied and satirised with a gentle humour. In addition, "unlike Carroll's, Gaganendranath's wonderland reflects the real-world co-existence of separate ethnicities and regional/linguistic and religious communities in India" (Sircar, 2018, p. 191). This can be seen in the railway official Parrott Saheb, who appears to be a non-Hindu, as well as in the Mouse Priest and the Mongoose Preceptor, both Brahmanical. Also, the Dewan is portrayed as a non-Bengali North Indian, while Bhondaṛ Bahadur is a Bengali of the warrior class (pp. 190–192).

In this way, the traditional Indian element and the modern Western one are sought to be made acceptable as the hybrid nature of the future. Through an admirable speech Buddhimanta, an advisor to the toddy-cat Bhondaṛ Bahadur, presents the possibility of the synthesis of the metaphysics of Indian magic and

the logic of Western science. According to Dundes (1980), it is pertinent to relate the value of such sharing because folklore acts "as a mirror of culture" and "provides unique raw material" for the people to "understand themselves and others," but, on the other hand, there is an "apparent irrationality" of the fantastical elements of folklore, which "poses problems for literal-minded, historically oriented folklorists" (p. viii). The desirable outcome of stories like *Bhondaṛ Bahadur*, using and transforming elements of folklore, is understanding and accepting this synthesis. Gaganendranath Tagore has navigated the tricky chasm between science and magic through the irrefutable logic put forth by Buddhimanta, the Wise Hare. In addition, the character's very rational speech contests Lang's (1884) elitist and hegemonic Eurocentric view of folk literature as being "only concerned with the legends, customs, beliefs of the Folk, of the people, of the classes which have least been altered by education, which have shared least in progress" (p. 11).

The intertextuality in the Bengali wonderland is created by borrowing elements from and using variations of Indian epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, but also of *The Arabian Nights*. This is done by evoking the demon Maiy,[2] the life-saving herb *vishalya-karani* that saved Lakshmana and Haroun-al-Rashid in different escapades. The hollow pillar and the runaway platform are forerunners of Platform 9¾ and fantastic journeys in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1997–2007). Thus, "[i]n *Bhondaṛ Bahadur*, a 'book of just 74 pages,' a flawless fantasy world is created, 'with beasts, birds, demons and humans' and 'no shortage of comic ingredients'" (Sen, 1992, pp. 102–103; as quoted in Sircar, 2018, p. 233).

Bhondaṛ Bahadur may be seen in its genealogical context as a synergistic blending of the beast-fable cycle and the mock-heroic and burlesque *Kuntsmaerchen*. This can be described as a "collective fantasy," which "depends upon the symbolic system of a given culture," and the "communication of collective fantasy and symbols is a healthy thing" (Dundes, 2007, p. 275). In investigating the merits of *Bhondaṛ Bahadur*, Sircar (2018) also draws upon the part of folkloristics which considers the process of the "gradual, unselfconscious mutation of folk narrative over cultures to fit new languages, new landscapes and new communities" (p. 231) – oikotypification, a term borrowed from botany that explains a gradual transformation of the original features. The folkloric element, therefore, adds a new dimension to the original story and serves in both preserving the collective memory and reflecting the changes occurring therein.

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[2] Sircar (2018) suggests an incorrect name 'Maiy' as a compromise, because "'Maya' looks too much like the female name 'Māyā,' while 'May' looks odd, as does the 'Moy' of Bengali pronunciation" (p. 234).

Both translated texts include renditions of children's rhymes that are still sung in Bengal. The translated verses read very well in English, reflecting the care taken over the sight, sound, and meaning of the rhymes. Phrases like "To wed in Hurley-Burley Land, our Jewel, she shall go–" and "Come, oh come, Popinjay" show a painstaking verse translation (Sircar, 2018, pp. 143, 145). One gets a complete sense of the meanings and a colourful visualisation of the children with socks (*moja*), going after sweetmeats, etc. In addition, Sircar has provided full-fledged explanations of the new meanings emerging from words that rhyme as he draws attention to syllables such as in *tiye-ta,* the parrot*,* and *biye-ta,* the wedding (pp. 136–140; these are part of the nonsense verses that are merged into the songs of the wedding-party of the Dough Boy/Prince in *Kheerer Putul*, who is substituted for a real child by the blessing of Shashthi – the Christian readers would be able to identify Shashthi holding an infant in her arms with the image of Madonna with the holy babe in arms). Most folk-lorists share the concern of Sircar regarding the commonness of origin and transmission of tales and try to point out and explain the variations in folktales that may be experienced due to aspects like time, space, speaker's style, narrator, taste, and the inclination of the audience. A rhyme similar to "The Drums of Kamalapuli" from *Kheerer Putul* ("Grooms front, beside, the horse-grooms splendid / Drums' and cymbals' sounds are blended" – p. 139) occurs as the "Song the Army Sang" in *Bhondar Bahadur* ("Agdoom bagdoom horse-dom splendid / Shields, mridangs, and cymbals blended" – p. 276).

Sircar (2018) has situated these tales in the Bengal Renaissance in an elaborate *Preface* that traces the development of art and culture in Bengal after the East India Company took the control of large areas of Eastern India from the Moghul Emperor Shah Alam, in 1765. The British-Indian interaction throughout the 19th century led the metropolitan Calcutta to a "multifaceted sociocultural transformation" (p. xiii). He considers setting aside the Eurocentric term 'Renaissance' as being problematic and offers the Bengali term *Nabajagaran*, 'New Awakening,' to describe this transformation. Calcutta felt the influence of a new class of socially privileged Bengalis who came from the hinterland to settle in the city, being employed by the British government or in commercial employment, though in clerical and subordinate roles, despite the fact that they did not need such employment, as there were landowners among them who drew rent from their lands in rural Bengal (p. xiv). This group, the Bhadralok, 'gentle people,' formed the bridge to colonial modernity, having become aware of their "rediscovered ancient Hindu heritage" through the work of British Orientalists, and of the "political and cultural trends in Europe" (p. xiv). To his credit, Sircar is aware of the complex nature of this new emerging ethos:

"A creative synthesis of Western rationalism and ancient South Asian cultural treasure is no easy thing to achieve" (p. xvii).

The scholar contextualises the retelling and translation with a detailed history of the series of sub-periods into which the 'New Awakening' may be divided. It can be said that it has begun in 1765, with the coming of the English influence, and came to a close in 1919, the year of the vehement protest against the Rowlatt Act, and definitely ended in 1941, with the death of Rabindranath Tagore. The Renaissance encompassed social, economic, and political changes that had overtaken not only Bengal but all of India. In Calcutta, that period includes the religious, social, and educational reforms initiated by Raja Ram Mohan Roy and the Brahmo Samaj and "the introduction of Western educational models and dissemination of occidental knowledge" (Sircar, 2018, p. xvi–xvii), giving impetus to the English language. The growth of "a formal, modern and vernacular Bengali" alongside the study of English and the introduction of print technology and culture in 1800 led to the rise of a "vigorous and genuinely hybrid new literature" (p. xvii) arising out of the adoption of Western literary forms, particularly the sonnet and the novel, celebrating the eclectic culture of a growing metropolis. The Ray Chowdhary and Tagore families were two prominent "upper-crust" families who were involved in religious and educational reforms and, therefore, in "recreational writing for children" (xxiii). The stories written by Abanindranath Tagore and Gaganendranath Tagore will appeal to children today as they did yesterday, as fantasy tales, because children are "in some ways closer to the unknown, the unseen, and the mythical" (Hunt, 2001, p. 269). Besides, fantasy helps the child, as well as the adult, to address the questions of identity by dislocating the readers in space or time by "removing them from the structures that locate and bind them into a particular role within the family, the school, or the larger society" (Grenby, 2008, p. 164) and, by doing so, allows them to rediscover their real self or their identity vis-à-vis the outer world.

The academic merit of Sircar's book lies in the copious notes, annotations, and archival genealogies. These seem to take more space and reading attention than the two stories. Nevertheless, they accomplish both a narrative function as well as an academic one. At times, they are more absorbing than the stories in question, at others, they arouse an academic curiosity about other folk forms. Mostly, they do add a diachronic depth to the narrative. To quote Hunt (2018):

> Sircar wears his erudition lightly – his introductions, notes, and appendices contain much fascinating material that will be of interest to a very wide non-specialist and specialist audience, whether in India or in the West generally, and his own style is accessible and readable (p. x).

Sircar (2018), on his part, justifies his massive use of notes and appendices by writing that "both texts also have aspects to them which do not immediately meet the eye" (p. xxiii). The reader, the reviewer, or the scholar exploring *Fantasy Fictions…* cannot add more to the critique since Sircar himself reflects seriously on his role as a translator and annotator. His constant concern is with the process of translation and the limits of the translator's licence. Should a translation "make the readers forget that they are reading a translation, or constantly remind them of it? Wherein lies the balance between fidelity to a source and readability for the reader, between Translatese and English?" (p. xxiii) – he wonders. Quoting Walter Benjamin (2004), he hesitates between a good translation and its transmitting function (Sircar, 2018, p. xxiii). His efforts are to make the translation readable. The author also takes care to explain wherever he has taken liberties with the text, such as his addition of the chapter titles to *Kheerer Putul* for the "ease of reading" (p. x). He takes the process of translation as "a form of rewriting both produced and read within the ideological and political constraints *and a particular poetics* of the cultural system of a target language [emphasis in original]" (p. xxii) and asserts that "[s]ometimes, what is obvious but unstated in a text, the implied, culturally taken-for-granted semantic weight which certain sentences carry, needs to be made obvious in a translation, which cannot take that implied weight for granted" (p. xxviii).

Hunt (2018) puts the text squarely into the academic world, confirming his observation elsewhere that "traditional tales have in recent years produced some fascinating scholarship" (Hunt, 2001, p. 275). He considers Sircar's work an important addition to children's literature which, according to him, is now "firmly established as a core area of literary and cultural studies," affirming childhood as a stage that "crosses cultures" (Hunt, 2018, p. x). On the whole, the scholar provides valuable insight into the relevance of this type of translated literature from disparate cultures, calling this one a timely text. According to him, the material for children's literature must be drawn from the whole world keeping in mind the changing concept of childhood over time. Moreover, as Axel Olrik (1965) points out, "[a]nyone who is familiar with folk narrative has observed when he reads the folklore of a faraway people that he feels a sense of recognition even if this folk and its world of traditional narrative were hitherto completely unknown to him" (p. 131). Folklore, particularly in the realm of fantasy, provides a common heritage of imagination and reality to children.

Fantasy Fictions… traverses the whole range of translation and comparative studies, creating a priceless addition to children's literature as world literature. The cross-cultural translation and transmission provide a space of discursive interpretations across languages, cultures, and age groups. The task is

no doubt onerous, but Sircar is "a rare example of a scholar in this field outside India who can genuinely examine and link very disparate cultures […] moving between the international Anglophone and the Bengali worlds" (Hunt, 2018, p. x). To sum up, one may say after the scholar that the book "bring[s] together what a colonial Indian past took from the British and transformed it into something of its own drawing upon its own cultural traditions" (p. xi). Also, the stories presented here are "relatively unknown even in their larger national cultural context and revelatory in the wider world context, […] [and] are exactly suited to satisfy that appetite for cross-disciplinary international, innovative, and non-'mainstream' materials," as they are translated "for a multiple audience" (p. ix–x). Interestingly, another English translation from Bengali, a story by Trailokyanath Mukhopadhyay about Kankabati, a little girl in the 19th-century Bengal's Kusumghati, came out in 2016, translated by Nandini Bhattacharya. It is textured with annotations and with graphics that accompanied the original edition, as Sircar has done with Abanindranath's illustrated original.

Overall, Sircar provides valuable insight into the relevance of translated literature from disparate cultures. In the section "Folklore, Collecting Folktales, Colonial Control, and national Pride," he traces the archival history of the collection and printing of folktales from Bengal, Punjab and Kashmir, Himachal, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, beginning with *Old Deccan Days* by Mary Frere (1868). In the 1890s, Bengali folklorist Sarat Chandra Mitra started his work first on North Indian folktales and then on many other folk customs, not just in Bengal but over a very wide area.[3] Jack Zipes (2012) believes that "[s]tories emanated in prehistory from shared experiences, and this is still the case. It is through oral transmission that stories of different kind form the textures of our lives" (p. 7). Following this line of thought, the discussed book traces a continuity between the oral storytelling traditions of the Indian subcontinent from

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[3] The 19th century saw a revival of fantasy, folktales, and fairy tales all over the world and more than a century of research has successfully established the genre as alternate world literature. The epicentre of the preservation and perpetuation of these tales in India in the 19th century were the Metropolitan Presidencies. The oral traditional tales from Indian households have been preserved and archived in collections like *Old Deccan Days*, mentioned above, put together in the Bombay Presidency, and *Wide-Awake Stories* by Flora Annie Steel and Richard Carnac Temple (1884), a collection of stories from Punjab and Kashmir (Sircar, 2018, p. 4). With the seminal work of A. K. Ramanujan in the South and works of translators and Indophiles like William Jones and William Radice, successful transmission to the youngest inheritors of the tradition has been made possible and is available through more collections and translations into English.

its prehistoric beginnings, through formalised recitals, to the written forms that have survived to this day, with evolutionary mutations.

The book by Sircar is most certainly a much more methodical attempt than the "flint-flake" from a "Neolithic workshop" (Lang, 1885, p. 9). Several books based on folklore are adding to the growing field of folklore studies indicating a postcolonial affirmation of identity and a postmodern affirmation of plurality. *The Legend of Himal and Nagrai: Greatest Kashmiri Folk Tales* by Onaiza Drabu (2019), *Timeless Tales from Marwar* by Vijaydan Detha (2020), and *Jungle Nama* by Amitav Ghosh (2021), an adaptation in verse, are some examples of Indian folklore extending itself. Sircar's work proves that such texts may become the basis of academic thought. It is extensively researched and erudite, interesting as folk and fantasy fiction, a pleasurable read, and the wealth of material makes it an important text for folkloristics and children's literature studies.

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