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## RAY AND THE UNCANNY: LOCATING THE UNCANNY IN “FRITZ” AND “ANUKUL”

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### Abstract:

Satyajit Ray, apart from being an esteemed director and novelist was also a prolific short story writer, but, unfortunately, unlike his novels, his short stories are not considered as a part of the Bengali literary canon. Nevertheless, much like his novels, most of his short stories fall under the category of detective fiction, a genre, that he had mastered. However, similar to the short stories available in the Western canon, especially, the American canon, there are some tales in Ray’s repository of short stories that revolve around enigmas and riddles which produce an uncanny effect. The uncanny can be defined as the uneasy feeling, distinguished from horror, generated by the emergence of a familiar thing that had been repressed. The aim of this paper is to locate and interpret the sources of uncanny in Ray’s “Fritz” and “Anukul”.

**Keywords:** Freud, Jenstch, Psychoanalysis, Uncanny.

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## Introduction

Short stories emerged during the late 18<sup>th</sup> century in England and early 19<sup>th</sup> century in America. In the United States, writers like Washington Irving and John Neal played a pivotal role in developing the genre, however, it is Edgar Allan Poe, who is generally credited with the establishment of short story as a literary genre. The most dominant themes of short stories the Western canonical short stories especially Irving's "Rip van Winkle", Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher", "The Gold Bug", W.W. Jacobs' "The Monkey's Paw" and so on, are enigma and dark mystery that incite an uncanny feeling in the readers. This trend is carried forward by the Bengali short story writers like Saradindu Bandopadhyay, Anish Deb and most eminent among them is Satyajit Ray.

The eminent author and director of 20<sup>th</sup> century Bengal, Satyajit Ray is celebrated for having created memorable series such as *Feluda* and *Prof. Shonku*. In fact, *Prof. Shonku* is the first ever science-fiction written in Bengali. The wide availability of the English translation of Ray's works lead to the initiation of numerous readers from various language communities, into Bengali literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, the international fame of Ray rests upon the iconic films directed by him. *Panther Panchali*, his debut film earned him critical acclaim and recognition. He received several international awards, especially noteworthy among them is the inaugural Best Human Document award that he received at Cannes Film Festival of 1956. In his lifetime Ray was graced with various prestigious awards including an Academy Honorary Award in 1992 and the Bharat Ratna, the highest civilian award in India, in the same year. Ray's cinematography and philosophy are widely discussed and studied in the academic milieu. However, the short stories authored by Ray remain unexplored. Mysteries dominate the gamut of his short stories and are popular for eliciting uncanny emotions from the readers. The two particular short stories that are under consideration in this study, namely, "Anukul" and "Fritz" emanate a very strong sense of uncanny, that can be more accurately

described and analysed employing Jentschian definition of the uncanny, rather than solely resorting to Freud, for the uncanny that permeates these tales can be better understood in the context of the revelation of something hidden as well as the animation of the inanimate producing the uncanny effect.

## **Uncanny**

The concept of uncanny was introduced by Ernst Jentsch in his 1906 essay "On the Psychology of the Uncanny". Uncanny is defined as a product of intellectual uncertainty by Jentsch, and it has been emphasised that the "doubt as to whether an apparently living being really is animate and conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate – and more precisely, when this doubt only makes itself felt obscurely in one's consciousness" awaken the strongest sense of uncanny (8). The example of the lifelike doll Olympia from Hoffmann's "The Sandman" is used in the essay in order to substantiate and explain the claim. In the 1919 essay "The Uncanny" the concept of the uncanny is further elaborated and discussed by Sigmund Freud. He relates uncanny with repetition compulsion and also refers to the German word *Unheimlich* in this connection establishing that uncanny brings before us our forbidden and repressed impulses and fears.

### **"Fritz": Locating the Uncanny in the Text**

Ray's short story "Fritz" revolves around the eponymous mysterious doll that supposedly possesses certain features of the living, and the resultant uncanny feeling that it arouses. According to Ernst Jentsch, the most powerful sense of uncanny results from the intellectual uncertainty produced from the doubt that perhaps, an inanimate object is animate and vice-versa:

In storytelling, one of the most reliable artistic devices for producing uncanny effects easily is to leave the reader in uncertainty as to whether he has a human person or rather an automaton before him in the case of a particular character.... Conversely, the effect of the uncanny can easily be achieved when one undertakes to reinterpret some kind of lifeless thing as

part of an organic creature especially in anthromorphic terms, in a poetic or fantastic way. (11-12)

Freud is of the opinion that "An uncanny experience occurs either when repressed infantile complexes have been revived by some impression, or when the primitive beliefs we have surmounted seem once more to be confirmed" ("The Uncanny" 17). He has classified the uncanny feeling aroused by the supposed animation of an inanimate object and vice-versa under the second group. He further points out that incidents which become sources of uncanny in one place, surprisingly, in another place they no longer excite the uncanny:

The story-teller ... can select his world of representation so that it either coincides with the realities we are familiar with or departs from them in what particulars he pleases. We accept his ruling in every case. In fairy-tales, for instance, the world of reality is left behind from the very start, and the animistic system of beliefs is frankly adopted. Wish-fulfilments, secret powers, omnipotence of thoughts, animation of lifeless objects, all the elements so common in fairy-stories, can exert no uncanny influence here; for, as we have learnt, that feeling cannot arise unless there is a conflict of judgement whether things which have been "surmounted" and are regarded as incredible are not, after all, possible; and this problem is excluded from the beginning by the setting of the story....

The situation is altered as soon as the writer pretends to move in the world of common reality. In this case he accepts all the conditions operating to produce uncanny feelings in real life; and everything that would have an uncanny effect in reality has it in his story. (Freud, "The Uncanny"18)

Therefore, Pinocchio, the marionette getting the gift of life from a fairy, the instant fulfilment of the old man's wish that the marionette must become a real boy, the gradual elongation of Pinocchio's nose with every lie he fabricates, none of them incite the uncanny (*Pinocchio* 1940). The "conflict of judgement whether things which have been 'surmounted'" are possible or not does not arise in the case of *Pinocchio* because from the very beginning, it transports us to a world of imagination, magic and wish-fulfilment (18). However, similar instances in "Fritz" become sources of

uncanny because the story is set in a realistic atmosphere mirroring the real-life conditions and thus, the possibility of an animate doll stimulate the “conflict of judgement” by threatening the possible conformation of the “animistic system of beliefs” that we have surmounted (18).

### **The Animated Doll**

In “Fritz” the uncanny effect is produced primarily, by portraying the possibility of the doll becoming animate and finally, by the discovery of a small human skeleton in the place where the doll was buried. Fritz was bought from Switzerland by the protagonist Jayanto’s uncle and was instructed by the seller that the doll should be addressed as Fritz, for the doll supposedly responds only to this name: “The little old man had been bought in a village in Switzerland. The man who sold him had ... said ... ‘He’s called Fritz. You must call him by this name. He won’t respond to any other.’” (Ray, “Fritz” 192) However, the strongest sense of uncanny in the story is produced by two specific incidents, the first one being Jayanto’s suspicion that a two-legged creature was walking over his chest and his belief that it was his doll Fritz: “‘Something walked over my chest. That’s what wake me.’ ... I bent over the cloth and saw tiny, brown circular marks on it.... ‘Fritz came into our room last night. Those little marks on my quilt were his footprints’”(194-96). The second incident is the unearthing of the tiny human skeleton instead of the doll from the burial site of the doll: “There lay at our feet, covered in dust, lying flat on its back, a twelve-inch-long, pure white, perfect little human skeleton” (199). Thus, the uncanny is excited in the readers by the imposition of human attributes onto a doll and the creation and careful manipulation of the atmosphere of foreboding and gloom in the story, by the author.

### **Resurrection of Suppressed Childhood Complexes**

The incidents of “Fritz” can be interpreted in terms of the uncanny effect produced by the revival of “repressed infantile complexes” (Freud 17). Jayanto became

extremely attached to Fritz, so much so, that he forgot all his other toys and “spend hours just talking to him.” (Ray 192) Freud in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” has established that children replace the mother with their toys. He notes that children re-enact the disappearance and eventual reappearance of the mother through the game of ‘gone’, where they fling away the toy symbolising their separation from the mother and later, after retrieving the toy, greet it joyously and this is interpreted as the symbol of the return of the mother (Freud 53). Therefore, it can be presumed that for Jayanto, Fritz becomes the replacement of his mother. The battering of the doll’s face by a few stray dogs symbolise the separating of the mother from the child by the father and the child’s fear of castration: “... stray dogs were having a nice tug-of-war with Fritz. Although he didn’t actually come apart, his face was battered beyond recognition and his clothes were torn. In other words, Fritz did not exist for me anymore.” (Ray 193) The subsequent burial of the battered doll under the deodar tree is symbolic of the repression of the Oedipal impulses and the fear of castration into the dark recesses of the unconscious mind. The trip to Bundi, where all those incidents had originally taken place, triggers the revival of the repressed childhood complexes of Jayanto in the form of recurring return of the memories of Fritz. This return of the repressed fears and complexes provoke him to sense Fritz near him which results in his increased anxiousness and gloom. As a consequence of this an uncanny effect is produced in the story. However, the strongest sense of uncanny is generated at the conclusion of the short story where the characters unearth a little skeleton from the place where the doll was buried, a symbolic representation of the ultimate confrontation of Jayanto with his repressed impulses and fear.

### **Fritz as the ‘Double’**

The impression of the uncanny generated by the particular tale “Fritz” can alternatively be interpreted in reference to the concept of the double. Freud maintains that, according to Otto Rank the double is connected with “reflections in mirrors, with shadows, guardian sprits ...” (9). It is “an insurance against

destruction to the ego ...” (9). A child does not fear the animation of its doll, rather, it is desired. As a child Jayanto too fantasised about his precious doll being alive: “... Fritz had such a funny smile on his lips and such a look in his eyes, that it seemed to me as though he could understand every word. Sometimes, I wondered if he would actually converse with me if I could speak to him in German.” (Ray 192) He projected his ego upon the doll, it was his double, a way of defying death. However, these ideas spring:

from the soil of unbounded self-love, from the primary narcissism which holds sway in the mind of the child as in that of primitive man; and when this stage has been left behind the double takes on a different aspect. From having been an assurance of immortality, he becomes the ghastly harbinger of death. (Freud 9)

Hence, when Jayanto returns to Bundi as an adult, his infantile desire and fantasy of Fritz being alive, turns into a nightmare, arousing a sense of uncanny.

### **Anukul and the unheimlich**

The word heimlich is the German word for home. The home is a space that stands for familiarity, home is that very known space to us. Therefore ‘unheimlich’ stands for something that is not home, that is not familiar. Ray’s short story “Anukul”, dwells in the realm of the uncanny and Ray is able to quite successfully evoke the sense of the same among his readers. The story is about a man Nikunja Babu hiring a ‘mechanical servant’ from a robot supplying agency. This robot is named Anukul. Ray informs his readers that the robot is an android “which meant that it looked exactly like an ordinary human being although it was really a machine” (Ray 643). The ‘familiar’ or the ‘heimlich’ is readily established here with the human appearance of the robot. Anukul is a robot but the appearance, the voice of Anukul makes it nearly impossible to distinguish between a human being and a robot. Anukul does not sleep, Anukul does not lose patience but does Anukul have a mind? More than anything else, the thinking abilities and emotional faculties of Anukul is what the

narrative seems to be preoccupied with. Whether it is Nikunja Babu or his uncle Nibaran Banerjee, they are all quite inquisitive about Anukul's mental functions. At the robot supplying agency, Nikunja babu asks, "Does he have a mind?" (644) Few days later Nikunja babu finds out that Anukul was performing tasks without even being asked to do so, this amazed Nikunja babu. He gradually believed in the fact Anukul was among those few robots with a thinking capability perhaps a brain like thing (646). Anukul was an 'android', with the exact looks of a human being. This amazement of the characters in regards to Anukul's intelligence and thinking and feeling abilities with an absolute human appearance, gives rises to an uncanny feeling. According to the general human consciousness the exclusive human faculties of human emotions and other mental functions are not supposed to be present in a robot, a non-human. But Anukul can think, Anukul has an ego, it revolts to any wrong doing from the master or from anyone else. The robot as an obedient servant, does not work here. The robot as a mere 'thing' is not the case with Anukul.

### **Locating the Uncanny in Anukul**

'Uncanny' is that feeling which is terrible and arouses within us dread and horror, but the feeling of the uncanny at the same time it is not something clearly definable. This is not specifically that ghastly horrifying experience but something not quite easily distinguishable as a horrific experience but something that is known to us and is familiar (Freud, "The Uncanny"1). The 'familiar' becomes the cause of fear. The familiar here is the human quality of thought and feeling. This very aspect of exclusive humaneness is something that we seldom ascribe to beings other than the human and partially if not fully to the animal kingdom. As for the plants it is therefore the reason why the botanical world and their response to various impulses like pain, displeasure is difficult for us to grasp. Stalwart scientist Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose in his pioneering work 'plant response' titled, *Response in the Living and Non-Living* (1902), lays down the scientific theories and observations of various modes and methods of plants' response to different stimuli. But that is in no way

similar to our response of the animal world. In Roald Dahl's short story, "The Sound Machine", Dahl presents before us the voice of the botanical world, the sound of the plant it's cries, it's auditory response to pain which is a "throatless, inhuman shriek, sharp and short, very clear and cold" (Dahl 105). The story ends with a tree suggestively taking revenge on the protagonist Klausner, for harming it.

A voice of the plant! A plant ego! Hence a sense of uncanny prevails here too for this act of taking revenge is primarily a phenomenon or an act of the animal and the human world. The voice does not belong to the physiological functions and response systems of the plants, neither does it have the faculties to generate a emotional response, quite essential for a living organism to be revengeful. Similarly, a programmed, mechanical servant should not possess the emotional faculties to think or to feel but the way the story ends suggests that it does. Nikunja Babu's financial condition deteriorates due to wrong business decisions and soon a time comes when it becomes very difficult for him to continue making the monthly payment for his retaining Anukul. He informs Anukul about this unfortunate turn of events with a heavy heart and Anukul tells him that he would try to find out a solution. In the meanwhile, Nikunja Babu's uncle, Nibarun Banerjee turns up, he has come to stay with his nephew for an unstipulated length of time. Nibarun Banerjee on few occasions had been quite impolite with Anukul, despite his nephew's repeated warnings. One fine day he ended up giving Anukul a slap and in return Anukul gave him a high voltage shock which killed him. This shock was camouflaged by the sound of thunder striking at the very same moment. Therefore, this deed remained a secret. But the posthumous consequence was that Nikunja Babu inherited all of his uncle's property, valued at a little more than a million rupee the very next day. This not only helped Nikunja Babu get rid of his financial crisis but also it presents before us the fact that Anukul actually thinks! Just as the man at the agency had told Nikunja Babu "that certain robots had something akin to a brain

and could think" (Ray, "Anukul" 646), Anukul definitely fits into that category. But what gives rise to the feeling of the uncanny? Jentsch says,

If a correlation 'new/foreign/hostile' corresponds to the psychological association of 'old/known/familiar.' In the former case, the emergence of sensation of uncertainty is quite natural, and one's lack of orientation will then easily be able to take on the shading of the uncanny (Jentsch 4-5).

The 'new/foreign/hostile' is Anukul, the knowledge of the fact that Anukul is not a human, is not 'us' acts as the pivotal framework for the functioning of the uncanny. The 'old/known/familiar' is his response to Nikunja Babu's trouble, the master's crisis, the human faculties of thought, reason and emotions. A mere robot programmed to perform tasks, would not have gone ahead to invest any form energy in finding out the solution to his master's crisis. A programmed machine would not try to help his master retain him. Thus, the association of the new and the foreign with the old and the familiar, results in the rise of the feeling of uncanny.

## **Conclusion**

The uncanny is a crisis of the proper: it entails a critical disturbance of what is proper (from the Latin proprius; 'own')...It is a crisis of the natural, touching upon everything that one might have thought was 'part of nature': one's own nature, human nature, the nature of reality and the world. (Royle 1).

Crisis of the proper and the crisis of the natural, these are the two pillars that hold the empire of the uncanny. The crisis is felt by the readers and this phenomenon interferes with the psychic processes and thus the feeling of the uncanny is born. Anukul the android, Fritz the doll both display human features, they both crossover the realm of the 'natural', that is not characteristic of the meaning the readers attribute to them or their very presence. Suspense, surprise and the uncanny are recurring themes in the short stories of Satyajit Ray. He has often played with and defied this element of the 'natural' in his stories, be it "Ashamanja Babu's Dog" or "Mackenzie Fruit". The dog that laughs and the unnatural, unearthly

fruit, they both create a crisis of the proper. It is the sheer craftsmanship of the author to elevate from the level of the natural and at the same time refrain from delving completely into the arena of the supernatural and Ray was a master of this as evident in the entire oeuvre of his short stories.

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