

The Retriever and the Rebel: Horror and the Non-Human Category in Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay’s “The Red Fireflies” (1929) and “Pintu” (1933)

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Introduction

One of the ways in which horror in literature informs the intersections of itself with postcolonialism is in its relocation of the actual horrors and anxieties that belie Western colonial interventions from what the colonizer experiences to what he embodies. It reconstructs the very colonial experience as the original horrific one, “thus explicitly or implicitly reversing the gaze of European selfhood” (Khair 2018, 435). As a project with a decided stake in the economic opportunities offered by colonized geographies, Western colonialism was marked

by an instrumentalist view of nature – the natural world with its myriad resources, flora and fauna, ecosystems, virgin lands, waters and, most importantly, the laws of nature that predated or were untouched by humans and technology. Nature and its resources were viewed by the colonial project as opportunities for “development” – a ruthless, selfish idea of unfettered material growth, one that had no qualms “[riding] roughshod over local human and environmental interests in the attempt to secure preferential conditions for international trade” (Huggan and Tiffin, 2010, 32). The “environment,” i.e. the immediate surroundings and relationships that were encountered by this aspect of colonial interest was taken for granted as a “space,” at the cost of which the colonizing project could expand without restrictions or remorse; relationships of indigenous populations – the original inhabitants of the geographies that the colonizer invaded, such as the Indian Santhals or the Australian Aborigines – with the land were blatantly disregarded in favour of aggressive colonial expansion and their economic greed. Animals, an antithesis to the “human,” were otherized without much ado; when viewed as a threat, they were eliminated, when of potential interest for the colonizer, they were fully and remorselessly harnessed. This comprised atrocities against certain animals in colonized geographies, such as the jackal in southern Africa or the dingo in Australia, while the elephant in the Indian subcontinent was brutalized as well as weaponized for its powers.¹ Colonial expansion, therefore, was

1 It might be worthwhile here to mention the politically interesting representation of the scorpion – a potential ‘weapon’ of

not only limited to the socio-economic or the geopolitical – it was one that also brought about radical and often atrocious shifts in the meaning and nature of relationships and boundaries: relationships with wild nature and animals that the indigenous populations cultivated – one that carried mystical and religious connotations which, more often than not, ensured sustainability, co-existence, and boundaries, such as in Bengali and Santhal cultures – were supplanted by utilitarian, instrumentalist ones that were interested only in “conquering” wild nature and killing/taming its bestial populations for their use. It is, therefore, obvious, that anti-colonial struggles would have to encompass these definitions of “nature,” “environment,” and “animals” as embodying the shifts in perspectives and meanings. The definition of the environment, when re-read in the light of these struggles, comes to carry not only the interests of the colonizer but also its horrifying effects on the relationships and surroundings both old and new. David Arnold, examining the relationship between “empire” and “environment,” elaborates on the idea of the environment as a dual text offering a detailed view of these material and ideological contestations:

As opportunity and resource, the environment is mobilized to explain the political logistics of empire and the expanding of commodity frontiers. It is equally

threat – in the British colonial imagination, particularly during the Second Anglo-Afghan War: it was pictured as “a menacing, hybrid thing,” one that was “[h]alf insect, half Afghan tribal fighter” (Burton 2020, 167).

used to critique the inherent violence of empire, its territorial appropriation, and its subordination, marginalization, or elimination of nonwhite populations. (Arnold 2015, 54)

Horror as a literary phenomenon thus becomes instrumental, in such cases, in reconstructing the horrific as a category that colonial aggression begets and finds itself on the wrong side of. Nature (the earlier “space”) and animals (the earlier bestial and “not human”) assume an active status in resorting to the resistive tendencies that inhabit the margins of the colonial experience. Andrew Hock Soon Ng aligns the spatial possibilities of horror to the Foucauldian concept of the heterotopia, a cultural and discursive space existing as the “other” to a given space of reason and culture, which serves as a counter-site where the latter is “simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (Foucault 1986, 24; Ng 2018, 444). The analysis of such a space can be regarded as integral to the examination of literary horror, with the non-human category emerging as a more effective site for reading the problematics of empire about enabling/resisting the colonial footprint.

While the Byomkesh Bakshi mysteries of Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay (1899-1970) have been widely read and critically examined as a non-white “writing back” to the Eurocentric core of detective fiction, the postcolonial legacy of his horror stories, I think, has been somewhat

missed out on. Yet the study of these stories reveals an active addressing of the colonial enterprise, the conflict between Western reason and native belief systems, the question of boundaries and transgression, and the problematics of locating the environment and the non-human concerning the opposing ideologies of colonizers' interference and colonial resistance. Among other stories, "Pintu" (1933) and "Rakta-Khadyot" ("The Red Fireflies," 1929) stand out as particularly relevant in this regard, exploring duly the idea of colonial transgression and indigenous resistance through the deployment of horror. The presence and activities of the titular pariah dog in "Pintu" and the unnamed one in "The Red Fireflies" highlight, together with the ominous stance of the environment in both stories, the banal impact of colonial conditioning; its being ultimately questioned and subverted secures, through the resistive outcomes, the need to revise conditioned causes and align it ultimately towards reclamation of dignities – the ones embedded in and between the non-human category, the environment and the indigenous cultures in colonized geographies – and environmental justice.

The West and its "Other": The Problematics of Space in Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay's Horror Stories

The settings of Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay's horror stories feature primarily three locations – the heart of Calcutta, the Bengal countryside, and the Paschim or

the western margins of the then Bengal Presidency, now Jharkhand and Bihar. The city exists as an embodiment of colonial modernity – Anglicized beliefs and attitudes, Western education, the championing of rationality, and technological progress. The existence of the rural is significantly antithetical to the urban spaces and this modernity, as in “Pintu” where rumours of the existence of a spirit in the adjoining wetlands infest the village; at the same time, it presents several opportunities that might serve to justify intervention and, of course, transgression, as is seen, for example, in the abundance of ducks that provide an opportunity for shooting. At the same time, the Paschim stood out as a distinct “other,” a settlement doubly colonized; besides being part of the British colonial territories, it became, owing to its resources and opportunities, a second settlement for the Bengali *bhadralok* population. Ahana Maitra elaborates on the history of this double colonization as she observes:

[T]he *bhadralok* flocked [to the *Paschim*] as health tourists from around the second half of the nineteenth century in order to flee the epidemics of *kala-azar*, smallpox, and cholera. Furthermore, colonial discourses on public health and hygiene led many to believe that the inherently miasmatic conditions of the tropical plains and the unsanitary living practices of its people were primarily responsible for the spread of these epidemics. *Paschim* was therefore sought to be “made” – both textually and materially – into an “other” of Calcutta, developed not on its own terms

but as a counterpoint to the “unhealthy” city. Moreover, as professional opportunities for the *bhadralok* began to dry up – since more began to avail of the opportunities of English education than could be gainfully employed in the city – the *Paschim* began to be seen as a land for opportunities. (Maitra 2022, 17)

The *Paschim*, therefore, was invaded by the West in two waves – first by the British colonizer, followed by the Bengali *bhadralok*, both of them bringing with them the transgressive attitude of colonial modernity and reason in their motives and motivations. Encountering strangeness in such cases often included transgressions of pre-colonial belief systems and boundaries, as in the case of “The Red Fireflies” where the old Muslim cemetery poses an “otherness” to the rational and the empirical. The land, moreover, attracted the interests of the European indigo planters who exposed it to the rule of terror and atrocities against the native peasants, and the ideological position of the Bengalis who later bought out these estates from the outgoing European planters did not look too good either. The environment is seen to bear and symbolically convey, through the uncanny, the traumatic impact of these colonial monstrosities, as is sensed by the “spirit-seeker” Barada in the environment of Nilmahal in the story “Nilkar” (“The Indigo-Planter,” 1958), written well after Independence:

A strange rotten unholiness lurked somewhere like the muffled stench of covered drains. The indi-

go-planter *sahibs* were not just despots – they were evil. There was no sin that they did not commit. The footprints of their sins seemed not to have left the place yet. I remembered my brother’s saying – a poison far more dangerous than malaria lurks in the air of Nilmahal; if one stays there for long, one falls, one becomes inhuman. (Bandyopadhyay 1958c, 163-64; my translation)

The tenure of the colonial entitlement to these spaces, however, is often cut short as the consequences seem to emerge in a way that the West fears most, namely the contamination of its own space of rationality and the falling short of empiricism. As the bhutanweshi (ghost-seeker) Barada himself remarks in “Tiktikir Dim” (“The Lizard’s Eggs,” 1929), “What is most scary in this world is that object of fear which cannot be seen with one’s eyes, negated by reason or gotten rid of by any known means” (Bandyopadhyay 1929b, 17; my translation). The boundaries that demarcate the urban spaces of modernity are problematized as the uncanny often upset the commonly perceived sacrosanct nature of these boundaries. Such upsetting often carried “a mordacious critique directed at the changing urban developments of the city” and the banal impacts of its urban “modernity” on the environment (Ghosh 2022, 4), as manifested in the spirit that invades a colonial Calcutta paralyzed by waterlogging and darkness in “Andhakare” (“In the Dark,” 1930). It is interesting that in Sharadindu’s horror stories, the non-human is often imbued with

an agency that helps manifest the uncanny, as in the case of the fireflies which help shape the outline of the spirit in “Pratidhwani” (“Echoes,” 1938). Moreover, such an agency often derides the imposed demarcations between the rational and what this very same rational cannot fathom; it puts rationality to the test by bringing to it the frontier of experience itself, like the bumblebee in “Maran-Bhomra” (“Death and the Bumblebee,” 1931) which strays into the spaces of Calcutta, Bardhaman as well as the *Paschim* with the ill-omen of random death, thus exposing the limits of rational understanding and conveying an “unreal” reality heterotopic to the colonial project, its real “spaces” and ultimately its transgressive assumptions.

Perspectives on Nature, Horror and the “Other” in Bengali Literature: Looking at Saratchandra, Bibhutibhushan and Sharadindu

The intersection between horror, nature, and the limits of human understanding is not an altogether unexplored concept in Bengali literature, nor has it been unique to Sharadindu in his time. Bengali fiction often showed horror as one antithetical to reason – believing in ghosts was equivalent to cowardice. In Saratchandra Chattopadhyay’s (1876-1938) famous novel *Srikanta* (1917-1933) we find an early example of this interaction between horror and reason: Srikanta, the protagonist of the novel, is confronted by an elderly Bihari gentleman

in the hunting party of the prince, who mocks his disbelief in ghosts; in response, Srikanta takes it upon himself to visit the *mahasamsan* at night. The conflict of belief and disbelief here soon takes the shape of regional contempt as the Bihari gentleman curses Bengalis and their exposure to Western education as sacrilegious: “You Bengalis sneer at the supernatural because you’ve read a few pages of English. Bengalis are godless and unclean – un-Hindu” (trans. Aruna Chakravarti, 2011, 88). The idea of a horrible fate awaiting transgressors – including colonizers – is reinforced in the Bihari gentleman’s tale through the mention of Goddess Kali:

He told us of people who had seen Kali and her demons playing a ball game with a hundred human skulls; of others who had heard demoniac laughter. He talked of white foreigners who had lost their lives in their attempts to test the truth of his assertions. (ibid)

Against this staunch belief in spirits – aligned here to the Hindu belief of the wrath of Goddess Kali – lies Srikanta and the Bengali community, ridiculed and dismissed as “Anglicized and atheistic” (ibid, 89). Srikanta, offended by this, goes to the *mahasamsan* – and is horrified by what lay embedded in nature:

The forest came alive with the moaning and crackling of silk-cotton stems and the skeletons around me breathed deeply. I shivered in spite of myself. I

shivered in spite of myself. I knew that it was only the wind passing through the cavities of the skulls. But, try as I would, I could not subdue the primeval fear that, however deeply buried beneath layers of conscious reasoning, rose up now to awe and frighten the fear of life after death. (ibid, 98-99)

The above incident does not materialize into the actual manifestation of ghosts, for Srikanta is quickly rescued from the place by the staff of Pyari the courtesan, and the village chowkidar; Saratchandra, too, does not cultivate this issue further, save for the Bihari gentleman ascribing his still being alive to his being a “true Brahmin” (ibid, 106) – a marked instance of Hinduism being a fulcrum around which popular belief and disbelief moved. Also, at a time when Bengali nationalism – one that Saratchandra, too, champions – was at its peak, this incident serves to highlight the way the *Paschim* looked at the Bengalis (Srikanta, though, is no embodiment of colonial modernity; he has lived mostly in the *Paschim*). But the fact that such a menacing face of nature should be revealed to a member of a hunting party is one perhaps most worth wondering about.

Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay (1894-1950) is yet another famous writer who has explored this concept in his fiction. His *Aranyak* (Of the Forest, 1939), which explores the human experience close to nature, does not leave out the horrifying prospects that might befall

human interventions; it looks at a menacing aspect of nature, whose retributive tendencies often included the supernatural. The incident in the Bomaiburu jungle in the novel is a prominent example: a mysterious spirit, assuming sometimes the shape of a lady and sometimes of a dog, keeps haunting the camp during the survey, as a result of which Ramchandra Amin turns insane. Six months later, the spirit haunts an old man and his son, to whom the land had been rented out for grazing animals; the son eventually dies under mysterious circumstances, having probably been lured out by the spirit. The narrator's perspective on the wrath of nature highlights the need for checking ruthless human intervention and setting boundaries:

These were forbidding places. The moonlight was like the demoness of fairy tales who took you unawares, seduced you and killed you. These places were not meant to be inhabited by us mortals, but were home to some other creatures from strange lands. They had been living here for aeons, and they did not care for men who intruded suddenly into their secret kingdom. They would not forgo any chance to avenge themselves. (trans. Rimli Bhattacharya, 2017, 71)

Arriving at Sharadindu's experiment with horror and/or the supernatural, one is presented with a sense of historicity as well as religious elements. Muslim beliefs and value systems find a prominent place in his stories: the events in "The Red Fireflies" revolve around a "living"

grave in a Muslim burial ground whose existence dated back to the pre-colonial days – a grave that had, in the past, taken its revenge on a European who had dared to fire at it; in “Nakhadarpan” (“At One’s Fingertips,” 1958), a colonial-era manhunt succeeds due to the mystical occult practices of Mohsin Sahib, an elderly Muslim gentleman, using a Mughal-era ring he had inherited. A sense of history is evident in these representations: prior to the British, India was under Mughal rule for centuries; Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa were ruled by the Nawab of Bengal. Muslim value systems, therefore, were an important presence. At the same time, Sharadindu does not leave out the Hindu traditions: Mohsin Sahib refers to the potency of mystical powers and their use by Hindus; in “The Lizard’s Eggs” the Hindu rite of *pindadaan* in Gaya relieves the soul of a dead lizard. While no definite conclusions can be reached, the interplay of religious beliefs in the context of the supernatural presents ambiguities which, together with a sense of history, can be read as aspects of solidarity in colonial India, much like Saratchandra’s nationalism. On the other hand, while Bibhutibhushan develops his idea of the realm of the supernatural, the undead or the invisibilized by incorporating occult Tantric practices in his stories featuring Taranath Tantrik, Sharadindu, through Barada, lays his belief in theosophy when it comes to understanding spirits.

“Pintu” and the Fate of the Non-Human: Colonialism, Conditioning and Guilt

Collected as part of Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay’s young adult fiction, “Pintu” tells the tale of the supernatural on the margins of rural Bengal while symbolically addressing the inescapable concerns for the environment and its fate in the wake of an ever-increasing human intervention. Centered around an unnamed narrator and his hunting companion, a pet pariah dog named Pintu, the story revolves around their encounter with a spirit while hunting in the wetlands of Bengal – an encounter that ultimately costs Pintu his life. Using horror and doom as part of the fate that awaits transgressors at the limits of ordinary experience, the story reveals a grim commentary on what banal human activities may be sure to reap while relocating the agency of nature itself to mete out their fates. The idea of hunting serves to point out the pivotal role of colonial conditioning in the story as the narrator, in the very beginning, indulges in a problematic self-introduction, introducing not himself but his gun, followed by his love for shooting:

I have a double-barreled rifle. It is a 12-bore, breech-loading rifle – not a muzzle-loading one, that is. Although it has been designed by an Indian gunsmith, it is in no way inferior to a foreign one. It has a range of up to a-hundred-and-fifty yards – point-blank – and can be used to shoot ducks easily, although it is not a duck-gun. It is a favourite of mine.

I was very fond of shooting ducks. When the streams and canals were flocked by a great variety of ducks, I used to go out, my gun on my shoulder. (Bandyopadhyay 1933, 19; my translation)

Colonial hunting, which replaced the dominant Mughal tradition of hunting in India, was intrinsically connected, like its predecessor, with the display of power and status – albeit with a difference. In *Shooting a Tiger: Big-Game Hunting and Conservation in Colonial India*, Vijaya Ramadas Mandala elaborates significantly on the political and authoritative implications of hunting in Mughal India. Shikar outings in Mughal India, he points out, were way more than courtly leisure and revelry: they were a means to pursue kingly business such as surveillance of the dominions, listening to grievances of people and the army, and making important military, administrative and diplomatic decisions (Mandala 2019, 48-49). While bows and arrows, matchlock guns, and elephants were involved, the shikar expeditions also enabled a display of martial masculinity and physical valour, for example in the killing of wild buffaloes by Mughal courtly men with swords or spears. The political aspect of pleasing the emperor was clear in Mughal lion hunts, where a lion would be lured and trapped by gamekeepers and villagers, enabling the emperor to ultimately approach the net from outside and shoot the lion with a big musket, “bringing the hunt to a triumphant end” (ibid, 51). British colonial hunting in India came to adhere more

to the idea of “fair play,” bringing hunting closer to the status of “sport” and distancing it from such pre-colonial methods and means of hunting (*ibid*, 176). As compared to the earlier “savagery” of using rough and ready methods, violence, therefore, was rationalized and sanitized, and trophy-hunting became a mark of civilization in the colonies. At the same time, colonial hunting as a metaphor might differ from the Mughal tradition in one key aspect – technological prowess. The display of firearms reinforced the superiority of the colonial master in colonized territories, reinforcing imperial dominance. Mandala observes:

The difference between the Mughal and the colonial period with regard to hunting was that physical valour in fighting dangerous animals was favoured among the Mughal rulers whereas firearms enabled the British to pursue shikar more remotely, as a sport. Mughal hunt as an assertion of masculinity was thus replaced with the British hunt as an assertion of technological superiority and precision in using a firearm. While the possession of guns was an instrumental factor for the British in hunting large predators, successfully and in large numbers, it, in part, also confirms that such firearm control enabled them to display their military credence to the Indian population. (*ibid*, 52-53)

Technological prowess, therefore, worked firmly to cement the white man’s legitimacy of rule in the colony,

fulfilling that aspect of what Ashis Nandy calls a “search for masculinity and status before the colonized” and reinforcing his own identity as master before the subjects through a display of “conspicuous machismo” (Nandy 1983, 40). The shooting of ducks that lived in the rural margins and often destroyed the crops – thereby ridding the local peasants of a certain menace – may be seen, therefore, as signifying what Swati Shresth calls a paternal benevolent colonial intervention (Shresth 2009, 264), a presence whose footsteps the narrator problematically imitates. His description of his gun and his love for shooting precedes his introduction of Pintu – the dog after whom the story is named, who was his hunting companion, acting as a retriever on his shooting expeditions. With Pintu, the narrator’s imitative outlook is seen to extend as he posits him as an “other” to the hunting dogs of the West, their pedigree, and their behaviour. Pintu’s Indianness is established, in the opening introduction, in terms of an absence of foreign blood: “Pintu was a dog of purely Indian breed – he had not a drop of foreign blood running in his veins; one might as well call him a pariah” (Bandyopadhyay 1933, 19; my translation). While Pintu is not too courageous a dog, his lack of courage, however sarcastically, is attributed to his food habits, that is, the indigeneity of it: “My brother used to say, milk-and-rice have made all of Pintu’s courage shrink” (ibid; my translation). At the same time, Pintu’s flair for retrieving shot birds from anywhere – be it land, water, or mud – causes the writer to define his habits in

terms of his colonial counterpart, resorting to the English term for it: “In English, dogs of such behaviour are called retrievers” (ibid; my translation). A problematic, pathetic transmitting of colonial conditioning can be seen as the body of the non-human here becomes a site for the etching of colonially intended values and beliefs just like his master. His view of Pintu – however dear a companion – and his imitation of the colonizer’s hunting sport in colonized spaces embody what Nandy calls the releasing of forces within the colonized societies “to alter their cultural priorities once and for all” and helping, in the process, “to generalise the concept of the modern West from a geographical and temporal entity to a psychological category” (Nandy 1983, xi), resulting in a motivation that is seen to claim Pintu as its victim, both symbolically and, as the story unfolds, literally.

The narrator, along with Pintu, sets out at night to hunt ducks in a swamp twenty miles away from the city, disregarding the anxieties of the local village postmaster, who warns him against the presence of a spirit in the reeds there. The postmaster’s cautionary tale of a European *sahib*, who had gone out to hunt there and had not come back, is dismissed, and the narrator proceeds to head out, relying on his gun – thus reflecting the assumed superiority of rationalized violence which flouts the conventions hitherto respected by the locals and, with it, disrupts the placidity of the local ecology, following the footsteps of the colonial master. Just like the idea of

such an entitled “sport,” the same rationality also justifies cruelty in logical terms in Bandyopadhyay’s other horror stories, as one might observe in Gokulbabu, a professor of logic, with concerning his motives behind hunting in “Kalo Morog” (“The Black Cockerel,” 1958):

He satisfied his bloodlust by hunting doves, wild pigeons, and sometimes rabbits....He had even invented a meaning behind his love for hunting. Living beings are, by nature, violent, and violence is innate in man; one’s mental health might be hampered if blood is not shed at times. Hunting, therefore, is a must. (Bandyopadhyay 1958a, 173; my translation)

To Pintu, however, the hunt brings a tragic end. Pintu, as the narrator starts his shooting, repeatedly tries to persuade the narrator to leave the place as a sudden wail terrifies him. The non-human, while lacking language, makes the foreboding consequence amply clear: “Dogs cannot speak, but Pintu seemed to tell me clearly, ‘Come, let’s go back, this isn’t a good place, let’s not be here’” (Bandyopadhyay 1933, 23; my translation). At the same time, rationality turns a deaf ear to his pleas; Pintu’s sense is turned down, mistaken for his cowardice – but not for long. As soon as a duck is shot, a frightened Pintu and the bewildered narrator encounter the supernatural in the bushes:

I was surprised and moved towards the bush. The thorny bush did not have any leaves, the moonlight

fell on it clearly. Having gone within ten feet of the bush, I, too, stood still. I saw the dead bird lying on the ground, and the figure of a woman, clad in a white cloth, was bending over it, as if protecting it, (ibid, 25; my translation)

The spirit of the swamp immediately presents an “other” to the violent intervention of the narrator. She wails at the fate of the dead bird, highlighting the plight of the ecology; her protecting the bird seems to evoke the image of Prince Siddhartha (Gautama Buddha) and the wounded swan, in contrast to colonial ideology and its rationale of “sport” – the consequence of which is etched in the wounded body of the non-human, the duck. More interesting parallels can also be found if one looks at the Banshee, the Irish spirit whose wail signifies imminent death in an Irish family. The Banshee is connected intrinsically to the idea of the Irish homeland: she can be seen as symbolically carrying the message of loss under colonialism across the seas as she informs a writer in America of the death of his father (Yeats 1986, 384). While the Banshee’s wail signifies death and loss, it is rendered ecologically interesting in the context of what Patricia Lysaght notes:

In the treatment of the aural manifestations of the death-messenger, it appeared that the being’s cry was frequently compared to that of a bird or an animal, for example, an owl, a jack-snipe, a dog or a fox. (Lysaght 1986, 223)

The fact that the Banshee's wail can get mixed up with animal cries lends animals a new ideological ally in terms of agency, especially if one considers Ireland as a once-colonized territory and its mythical beliefs as an "other" to the British rationale. Yeats, moreover, points out that while the Banshee is mostly a friend of the household, at times she is an enemy too – a wronged ghost who "cries with triumph" (Yeats 1983, 384).

The wail of the spirit in "Pintu," too, turns from one of loss to one of vengeance. Retribution kicks in as she now leads the narrator deeper into the swamp, and he finds himself sinking. He senses the change in the nature of the wail: "I heard the blood-curdling voice, "Aha-ha-ha-ha!" But it was no longer a wail – it seemed she was laughing a laughter of demonic vengeance" (Bandyopadhyay 1933, 25; my translation). Pintu, in a bid to save the narrator, leaps to attack her and meets his death. The death of Pintu doubly redoubles the pathos in the story: weighed throughout against the colonial standards of the retriever, he meets his end trying to retrieve his master. Pintu's fate evokes the plight of the non-human under colonialism, a victim bearing the consequences of ideological conditioning. The rational dismissal of his dissuading – his act of original loyalty and "native" nous – stands out as a betrayal that costs his life. As James Serpell observes in the context of the loyalty of dogs and their being employed in human interest, "The proverbial friendliness and fidelity of dogs may...create a burden-

some sense of guilt when we use these animals in ways that appear to betray their loyalty and affection” (Serpell 2017, 312). The corpse of the non-human companion seems to hold colonialism and its assorted “sport” responsible, its tragic fate magnifying the author’s commentary. At the same time, the surrounding resistive nature seems to advocate a rejection of this conditioning, rendered ironically through the narrator as he awakens in a posture similar to the spirit and the duck: “I regained consciousness at sunrise the next day. I was still holding Pintu’s body to my bosom” (Bandyopadhyay 1933, 26; my translation).

“The Red Fireflies”: The “Other,” Demonization, and Resistance

“The Red Fireflies,” on the other hand, presents a more uncanny canine. In stark contrast to Pintu, he has no name, no pedigree, and no certainty of origin; strangely demonic in appearance, he at once constitutes an “other” to the colonial category. This is further augmented by the description of the strangeness of the place he inhabits – a strangeness that evades the rational. It is described, even more strangely, by the ghost of Sureshababu, who when alive, had visited his brother-in-law in Munger for a change of air and had died mysteriously:

Those who are familiar with the town of Munger know that there is a very old Muslim burial ground

here by the banks of the river, west of the well-known avenue called Pipar-Paanti. Almost all the graves here, it seems, are more than a hundred years old. The place is neglected. The graves have barely survived, sticking out their ribs amidst thorns and thickets.

In a corner of this ground is a grave of black stone. Many uncanny lores loomed in the town about this grave. I was curious after hearing these cock-and-bull stories. My elder brother-in-law said, the grave is a live one. Fifty years ago, a sahib had fired at the grave. The bullet had cracked open the stone, and blood had come out in spurts. The stain of it has not disappeared even today; now dry, it can be seen on the grave still. And the atheist *sahib* who had fired had not lived either – he had met a horrific end that very night. (Bandyopadhyay 1929a, 7; my translation)

The notion of a “living” grave overturns the empirical association of graves with the “dead”; at the same time, its situatedness is reflected in the pre-colonial ground, away from the doubly-colonized sphere of the *Paschim*, but bearing the wound of colonial intervention. Being alive lends the grave, in this case, an agency as opposed to the perceived status of the “dead” and the presupposed passivity of the same – an agency, the European *sahib* had dared to override and, as the lore went, had paid for with his life. The non-believing Sureshabu, however, chooses to follow the path of the colonial master and, in a desperate, meaningful attempt to take

a “jab” at the living grave, tries to hurl a stone at it and is momentarily intercepted by the said dog which is first seen curled up over the grave, as if guarding the bullet-wound, and moves away harmlessly when Sureshbabu and his brother-in-law approach the grave in the first place. The appearance of the dog is perceived as a weird “other” in the empirically surveying eyes of Sureshbabu:

It was black in colour, its height not in accordance with its length – its legs were crooked and extremely short. However, the most scary were its eyes – yellowish and somewhat bloodshot, and lacking pupils. If it blinked, it seemed as if fireflies were glowing in the darkness of the night. (ibid, 8; my translation)

The uncanny appearance of the dog and his guarding the wound inflicted on the “living” grave had made him one with the space in a way that is at once other-worldly and empathetic. The remark of Sureshbabu’s brother-in-law Subhash that it was the same dog that, as the tale went, had ripped open the sahib’s throat ascribes to him an agency to avenge interventions that violate the “life” of the place. Sureshbabu dismisses the claims to such an agency, by asserting that dogs do not live for fifty years. While he abandons his attempt as “[p]estering a fierce dog does not seem logical” (ibid; my translation), the tussle around logic continues. The West and its “illuminating” influence of rationality come to more pronounced loggerheads with the “superstitions” of Subhash as his wife and his sister, whose eyes “had been opened by the

golden touch of the light of the Occident” (ibid, 9; my translation), joins Sureshbabu against him. The Paschim is problematically othered by associating the region to the west of Bengal with cowardice as Sureshbabu ironically remarks, “I guess not having lived in the land of the khottas has helped me stay brave” (ibid; my translation). Rationalism ultimately comes to take the upper hand as Sureshbabu decides to go to the grave at midnight and mark it as a sign of his courageous intervention – an obvious conquest. His principled rejection of “superstitious” fears regarding violation of the site is further fuelled by an attempt at chivalry – braving fears and “conquering” an obstacle to winning a prize in the hands of the female sex – acts which can be called an emulation of the European “knightly.” His sister-in-law fixes the prize for him: “As soon as you emerge victorious, a woman of this household will mark your forehead with the red of her lips” (ibid; my translation). The chivalrous bid to assert masculinity in this case reflects an attempt to negate oft-prevalent notions regarding the alleged effeminacy of the Bengali bhadralok; Mirinalini Sinha elaborates this as she observes:

It may be conceded that broad generalisations about the mild-mannered and effete nature of inhabitants of certain regions in India or believers of certain Indian religions were long part of the stock of ideas held by Europeans, and even by some Indians themselves. (Sinha 1995, 15)

The same ideas are also reflected in Macaulay in his thoughts on the Bengali people:

Whatever the Bengalee does he does languidly. His favorite pursuits are sedentary. He shrinks from bodily exertion; and, though voluble in dispute, and singularly pertinacious in the war of chicane, he seldom engages in personal conflict, and scarcely ever enlists as a soldier. (Macaulay 1840, 39)

Sureshbabu's attempt to shake off this yoke, however, leads him to aspire toward the "other," the masculinity of the "manly" Englishman by following the footsteps of the earlier intervening sahib of the popular lore. The aspect of bravery, dangers surrounding the destination, and the prospect of winning a prize at the hands of his loved one makes Sureshbabu's quest a re-enactment of the knightly conquests; his readiness adds to it that aspect of chivalry which was commonly perceived as "the well-nigh unique mark of the Briton" (MacKenzie 1995, vii).

The end, however, comes for Sureshbabu in a way that ironically re-orient his step or, more correctly, misstep. On his way to the grave in the dead of the night, as he throws away his cigar, a pair of red lights – perhaps the bloodshot eyes of the dog himself – appear in the dark, luring him and leading him off the beaten track, and he follows despite himself. Mention may be made

here of W.B. Yeats' "The Curse of the Fires and of the Shadows," a retributive story rooted in colonial Ireland, where the British Puritan troopers who committed a massacre at the Abbey of the White Friars at Sligo are led into the forests by spirits only to fall off a cliff, towards certain death. The wrath of the Catholic "other" is shown together with the atrocities that had been committed against the friars as well as against Ireland. The agency of the dead is reflected in the scene witnessed by the soldiers – a scene which is a consequence of their actions:

Before them were burning houses. Behind them shone the Abbey windows filled with saints and martyrs, awakened, as from a sacred trance, into an angry and animated life. (Yeats 1914, 136)

A similar retribution befalls Sureshbabu too. The earlier rational dismissal gives way as he witnesses the uncanny after he trips, falls, and loses consciousness for a while: "I opened my eyes after a long time. Those two red eyes without a body were bent over my face, observing me closely" (Bandyopadhyay 1929, 11; my translation). The earlier road to chivalry now gives way to unchartered routes as he lies suffering: "I felt, with my whole body, the fact that I have crossed a path of infinite pain" (ibid; my translation) – a pain that avenges itself through the pain it inflicts on him, as it had on the sahib before him. Sureshbabu finds himself lying in the old, dried-up

moat by Pipar-Paanti; nature sides with the pre-colonial in checking his intervention both literally and symbolically. He succumbs to pneumonia, contracted that night, and his retelling the tale as a ghost in Barada's planchette brings to full circle the ideological implications of being "alive" in the context of colonial intervention and the ecology, "inspecting whose lives matter and who and what is always already marked as dead while alive becomes imperative" (Blazan 2021, 15) where the agencies of resistance and retribution are reassigned to nature, animals, and the domain of the alleged deadly and/or invisibilized.

Conclusion

The plight, wrath and revised agencies of nature and animals using the uncanny in Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay's horror stories raise pertinent questions of reclamation in the face of the colonial project and its ideology of intervention and epistemological dispossessions. Through the use of that unnamed which eludes Western empirical sensibilities, the stories bring to the popular imagination the same need to resist imperialism and its all-pervasive, all-consuming advances. This is in line with what Said notes regarding reclamation of colonized geographies:

If there is anything that radically distinguishes the imagination of anti-imperialism, it is the primacy of the geographical element. Imperialism after all is an

act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control. For the native, the history of colonial servitude is inaugurated by the loss of locality to the outsider; its geographical identity must thereafter be searched for and restored. Because of the presence of the colonizing outsider, the land is recoverable at first only through the imagination. (Said 1993, 225)

By engaging with imagination and the possibilities of such a recovery at that end of the popular cultural spectrum “where so much horror happily proliferates” (Gelder 2000, 35), Bandyopadhyay’s stories thus come to a more pronounced, more direct conflict with the machinery of colonial ideology and its dispossessing violence than meets the literal eye. Enjoying high popularity amongst readers and broadcast as part of the Sunday Suspense series, they, therefore, open up interesting avenues of rethinking nature and animals and restoring to them their innate dignities in the wake of debates, questions, and atrocities that surround the Anthropocene and the posthuman in the twenty-first century.

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