

TWO BENGALI TRANSFORMATIONS OF SHERLOCK HOLMES

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Hemendra Kumar Roy (1888 – 1963) was a many-sided man of literature and the other arts in what was till recently spelt ‘Calcutta’. He is, however, remembered most as one who single-handedly brought the English adventure story into the realm of Bengali children’s literature, beginning with the classic *Jaker Dhan* (‘The Haunted Treasure’) in the 1930s. This story of a treasure-hunt by two young men Bimal and Kumar in what was then Assam, and now includes parts of Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh, was so popular that Roy went on to write numerous sequels dealing with the adventures of these two characters, sending them to the planet Mars in the very next book, from where they escape back to earth in a Martian spaceship only to land on an island infested with dinosaurs – Roy’s adaptation of *The Lost World*. Most of the time, however, Bimal and Kumar are engaged in treasure hunts, haunted or otherwise.¹

As a counterpart to these two, Roy also created the detective Jayanta, his friend Maniklal, and their bungling police inspector friend Sundarbabu. The detective story had already made its way into Bengali popular literature, though, contentwise the stories seemed to aim at an adult audience. Roy wrote detective stories suitable for children and adolescents, sometimes original, as he claimed the first Jayanta-Manik novel, *Jayanter Kirti*, to be, or adapted from English novels or short stories. Two instances of the latter kind are the subjects of this study.

¹ This comment needs modification. Seven out of the thirteen Bimal-Kumar novels involve such a hunt each. Bimal and Kumar also team up with Jayanta the private detective and his sidekick Manik in eight novels, only one of which is a treasure hunt. Jayanta and Manik have a larger number of narratives – novels as well as short stories – devoted to them than Bimal and Kumar; see below.

Susan Bassnett-McGuire, in her book *Translation Studies*², points out the problems of semiotic transformation. She quotes Ludaskanov:

Semiotic transformations ... are the replacements of the signs encoding a message by signs of another code, preserving (so far as possible in the face of entropy) invariant information with respect to a given system of reference.³

She then goes on to consider (p. 18) 'the translation of a simple noun, such as the English *butter*':

When translating *butter* into Italian there is a straightforward word-for-word substitution: *butter* – *burro*. Both ... describe the product made from milk and marketed as a creamy-coloured slab of edible grease for human consumption. And yet within their separate cultural contexts *butter* and *burro* cannot be considered as signifying the same. In Italy, *burro*, normally light coloured and unsalted, is used primarily for cooking, and carries no association of high status, whilst in Britain *butter*, most often bright yellow and salted, is used for spreading on bread and less frequently in cooking. Because of the high status of *butter*, the phrase *bread and butter* is the accepted usage even where the product is actually margarine. So there is a distinction both between the *objects* signified by *butter* and *burro* and between the *function and value* of those objects in their cultural context ... The *butter* – *burro* translation, whilst perfectly adequate on one level, also serves as a reminder of Sapir's statement that each language represents a separate reality.

(p. 19; emphases as in Bassnett-McGuire)

From *butter* to *hound* is a large or small step, depending on one's point of view. Conan Doyle's 1902 novel *The Hound of the Baskervilles* has had numerous Bengali versions in which the killer dog appears unchanged, among them *Baskerville-Kukkur*, which literally translates as 'Baskerville-dog' by another Roy, Kuladaa Ranjan, in chaste

² Bassnett-McGuire, Susan, *Translation Studies* (1980; Revised edition, London & New York: Routledge, 1991).

³ A. Ludaskanov, 'A Semiotic Approach to the Theory of Translation', *Language Sciences*, 35 (April), 1975, pp. 5 – 8, cited in Bassnett-McGuire, p. 18.

Bengali, which incorporates the original illustrations by Sidney Paget from the *Strand*.⁴ The problem is that a gigantic, infernal dog, while perfectly acceptable as a monstrous creature anywhere, belongs specifically to Western mythology and folk-culture, with Cerberus and the Hound of Hell.⁵ This is why other adaptations of the narrative to the Bengali and Hindi screen, and to the form of the novel, have replaced Conan Doyle's hound, which, to quote Bassnett-McGuire, would not have the same 'function and value' in an Indian context.

In the Bengali thriller film *Jighansa* ('Blood-lust') released in 1951, and directed by Ajay Kar, there are the footprints of a huge man-shaped monster. It turns out to be the abnormally tall porter from the local railway station who is commissioned by the main villain to commit all the murders. In the Hindi adaptation of this Bengali film in 1962, *Bees Saal Baad* ('Twenty Years Later'), directed by Biren Nag, the hound undergoes the ignominy of being transformed to a cat with dancing bells tied to its feet. As it runs through the marshy woods, it creates the impression of a running woman. The villain, who is the father of the woman the lecherous zamindar (the Indian incarnation of Hugo Baskerville) kidnapped, uses this noise to create the superstition of the ghost of the

⁴ I am indebted to my former student Sudeshna Datta Chaudhuri, at present a Research Fellow, at Jadavpur University, Kolkata, for locating this rare title in the lending library in her locality. Like many Bengali publications, the date of its original appearance is not given in the 'new' edition of 'Rathjatra, 1389', the Bengali date corresponding roughly to July 1982. The publishers are M. C. Sarkar & Sons, Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, the same establishment which published Hemendra Kumar Roy's *Jaker Dhan*. There is at least one more, fairly faithful, translation by Amalendu Sen, which retains the English title in Bengali script, and which was published by the now defunct Abhyuday Prakash Mandir, Calcutta. It is in the National Library, Kolkata.

⁵ The phrase 'hound of hell' is actually used in the narrative of the curse in Conan Doyle's original [*The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1901-2) in *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Illustrated Novels* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (London: Chancellor Press, 1987), p. 212].

wronged woman haunting the marsh. He kills members of the family, and villagers believe it to be the revenge of the ghost.

Hemendra Kumar Roy Indianizes the setting of the narrative in his *Nishaachari Bibhishika* ('The Nocturnal Horror'), as with the two film versions, but takes no major liberties with the story, barring what he does to the hound.⁶ The narrative dealing with the apparently supernatural phenomenon is not in any separate manuscript as in the English original, or Kuladaa Ranjan Roy's faithful Bengali rendering. In Hemendra Kumar Roy, it forms part of the newspaper report on the sudden death of the latest scion of the Roychaudhuris (the Bengali name for the Baskervilles). It will be useful to juxtapose a section of the two accounts in Conan Doyle and Hemendra Kumar. The original is as follows:

[Hugo's companions] passed one of the night shepherds upon the moorlands, ... [a]nd the man ... was so crazed with fear that he scarce could speak, but at last he said ... "Hugo Baskerville passed me upon his black mare, and there ran mute behind him such a hound of hell as God forbid should ever be at my heels."

...

... standing over Hugo, and plucking at his throat, there stood a foul thing, a great, black beast, shaped like a hound, yet larger than any hound that ever mortal eye has rested upon. And even as they looked the thing tore the throat out of Hugo Baskerville, on which, as it turned its blazing eyes and dripping jaws upon [Hugo's companions], the three shrieked with fear and rode for dear life, still screaming, across the moor.

(pp. 212-14)

The first thing Roy does is to make the monster vocal:

⁶ Again, it is difficult to date this publication. It has recently been reprinted by the original publishers Deb Sahitya Kutir, Kolkata, in 2002 along with three other titles belonging to the same 'series'. The mention of a letter typed in Bengali in the first title *Guptadhaner Dushshwapna* ('Nightmare of a Treasure') suggests a comparatively late date, possibly the 1950s.

Legend says that just at that moment a hair-raising sound like the blowing of a thunderous conch-shell was heard in the marsh. No one had heard such a terrifying conch-shell blowing ever before.

...

Ripping the darkness apart there burst forth two terrible, ferocious and burning eyes, and some hungry and deadly teeth. Immediately afterwards, the air and the surroundings trembled once again with an ear-splitting call and the next moment from the pitch darkness appeared an impossible, unearthly and terrifying and gigantic shape. Not only were its eyes pouring forth hungry flames, its entire face was burning like a meteor! It looked as if this horrifying and massive apparition had just left some nightmarish hell to burst forth in the darkness of the night.⁷

Roy also makes the creature non-specific and mysterious. Dr Mortimer confirmed the supernatural narrative by saying that the footprints found near the body of Sir Charles Baskerville ‘were the footprints of a gigantic hound!’ (p. 219). Kuladaa Ranjan Roy retains this, only replacing ‘hound’ with the generic *kukur*, ‘dog’, as he has done in the title of his translation, where he uses the more Sanskritized form of the same word, *kukkur*. The English *hound* itself was a generic word, until it underwent specialization of meaning around the thirteenth century to imply ‘dog kept for the chase’.⁸ Regarding these footprints, the doctor, Phanindranath Gangopadhyay, in Hemendra Kumar Roy, says (pp. 236-37) that (a) the footprints were strange, (b) they were as big as human footprints but definitely not those of a human being and (c) the only animals that move around in the moor are horses, buffaloes, cows, donkeys, dogs or jackals. The footprints did not resemble those of any of such animals. He adds that several reliable people have seen a strange, supernatural creature, spouting fire from its mouth, accompanied by sky-splitting

⁷ Roy, Hemendra Kumar, *Guptadhaner Dusshwapna* (‘Nightmare of Treasure’) [and other novels] (First joint publication, Kolkata: Deb Sahitya Kutir Pvt. Ltd., January, 2002) p. 231.

⁸ See **hound** and **dog** in Hoad, T. F., (ed.) *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 221, p. 131.

sounds resembling the blowing of a conch-shell. It is never seen on moonlit nights. Local folk have named it ‘the meteor-faced she-troll’, *ulkaamukhi shankhachurni*.

When, at the climax of the novel, the creature is gunned down by the detective Bharat Bhushan Chaudhuri and his narrator friend Bhaskar, it turns out to be a nearly five-foot tall bear. Bharat explains to Hitendra (Sir Henry) that the sound emanating from the throat of bears often resembles the blowing of a conch-shell.⁹ Later, the villain Baren Basu’s (Stapleton) wife tells Bharat the history of the animal. It was reared by Baren since it was a month old cub. Baren taught it many tricks, among them to follow the smell of a person from some object belonging to the latter, ‘like a bloodhound’ (p. 294). Bharat comments that he has his doubts about how far a bear may develop such an ability, but says that Baren believed it could, hence the theft of Hitendra’s shoes twice over, discarding the mistakenly-stolen one of a new pair with an old one. However, Bharat says he believes the bear to have been lethally aggressive towards all strangers, and obedient only to Baren whom it acknowledged as master.

One wonders if the two film versions were not more logical and consistent in their adaptation of the concept of the Baskerville curse than Roy, who tries his best to retain the entity of a terrifying monster rather than replace it with the ghost of a wronged woman. A hound, regardless of the mythological or folk associations in Bengal, would have still been terrifying as an apparition with its phosphorus-coated mouth.¹⁰ However, one understands that in an Indian context, the family legend would sound less impressive

⁹ One needs the help of a zoologist to confirm this bit of information!

¹⁰ Incidentally, Roy’s bear does have its mouth coated with phosphorus.

with a killer dog than with a mysterious creature with a horrific voice. The films solved this problem by having the female relative of the villain (wife in Bengali, daughter in Hindi) wander around the moor, singing an ominous song, appearing to be the wraith of the wronged woman. Roy, perhaps without the literary tradition of a singing female ghost behind him, took recourse to a bear and its conch-shell like voice!¹¹

There is no such problem of consistency with Roy's Bengali adaptation of Conan Doyle's short story 'The Six Napoleons'.¹² Napoleon, arch-enemy of Britain in some respects, has also been the subject of romantic fascination to Englishmen, witnessed by the four volumes of Napoleonic stories by Conan Doyle himself.¹³ Dr Barnicot in the Holmes short story under discussion is described by Lestrade as 'an enthusiastic admirer of Napoleon, and his house is full of books, pictures and relics of the French emperor.' (p. 565) In an inspired act of transformation, semiotic or otherwise, Doyle's six Napoleon busts become in Roy 'Netajir Chhaymurti' ('The Six Busts of Netaji').¹⁴ The incidents,

¹¹ The tradition of the female singing wraith goes back at least to the Hindi classic *Mahal*, 'Palace' possibly produced in the early 1950s, starring legendary Bollywood actors Ashok Kumar and Madhubala in their younger days, with the latter lip-synchronizing one of melody-queen Lata Mangeshkar's earliest 'haunting songs'. Subsequently, the trope is used in *Jighansa* (Bengali), *Bees Saal Baad* (Hindi), *Kohraa*, 'Fog' (Hindi, 1963), *Who Kaun Thi?*, 'Who Was She?' (Hindi, 1960s) and *Kuheli*, 'Mist' (Bengali, 1970s), to name only a few. In all the films the ghost turns out to be a human being, with the exception of *Kohraa*, an adaptation of *Rebecca*, where it is actually the ghost of the dead first wife.

¹² *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Illustrated Short Stories* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (London: Chancellor Press, 1985), pp. 564-80 (*The Return of Sherlock Holmes*).

¹³ The four volumes include two comprising the delightful adventures of Brigadier Gerard, as well as *Uncle Bernac* (in which Gerard makes his first appearance) and *The Great Shadow*.

¹⁴ I possessed this little gem in a Hemendra Kumar Roy collection entitled *Goenda Kahini Sankalan* ('Collection of Detective Stories'), which I have, at present, misplaced. I am therefore unable to give bibliographical details, barring the fact that no name of any publisher was adduced to the volume, presumably to obviate copyright-related problems. In another Roy adaptation of a Holmes short story, 'The Beryl Coronet' becomes 'Firoza Mukut Rahasya', 'The Mystery of the Firoza Coronet'. Here, too, the investigator is Jayanta. The story has been reprinted in *Hemendra Kumar Roy Rachanaabali*, 'The Writings of Hemendra Kumar Roy' Vol. 15 (Kolkata: Asia Publishing Co., 1996), pp. 185-206.

almost unchanged from Doyle's original, are transferred to locations in and around Kolkata. The investigating trio corresponding to Holmes-Watson-Lestrade are Jayanta-Manik-Sundarbabu. Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose is said by Sundarbabu to be revered by the whole country. We thus have here a less ambiguous object of admiration than Napoleon. In keeping with Napoleon becoming Netaji, the treasure contained in one of the busts changes from the black pearl of the Borgias into the black pearl belonging to Empress Mumtaz, consort of Mughal Emperor Shahjahan.

What we see in the case of Doyle's hound is a western-cum-Christian narrative being adapted to a Bengali, specifically Hindu context, the monster becoming a Hindu she-troll, making a sound like a conch being blown, a device traditionally associated with Hindu religious rituals. With 'The Six Napoleons', a European conqueror-cum-autocrat is changed into a revered Indian, and specifically Bengali, freedom fighter with more secular overtones. Therefore, when it comes to the pearl, Indian Islamic history comes into play in the place of Renaissance Italy. What we have in place of mere semiotic transformation is total transcreation, where the outlines of the original western narrative remain unchanged, but the details undergo, in the case of 'The Six Napoleons' entirely successful, and with *The Hound of the Baskervilles* somewhat less convincing oriental transformation.

[Essay no. 8 in *Reading Children: Essays on Children's Literature*, ed. Rimi B. Chatterjee & Nilanjana Gupta (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2009), pp. 139-147. Footnote no. 1 has been added and fn. 4 slightly modified after publication.]