

## **Reality, Realism and Fantasy: A Study of Ray's Children's fiction**

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### **Abstract**

In my paper I intend to first explain different form of realism by discussing Ian Watt's definition of realism, in *The Rise of The Novel* comparing and contrasting it with Brecht and Luckas's idea of realism as explained in *Bertolt Brecht: Against George Luckas*. Secondly I will discuss in brief the difference between reality and realism in a work of fiction. Thirdly, I will talk about the portrayal of reality and realism in children's literature, using socialist realism and Brecht's view on it. In order to discuss third part of my paper I will analyze film maker Satyajit Ray and his socialist- realist- fantasy film *Hirak Rajar Deshe*. The movie is adapted from Ray's father's collection of work for children name *Goopy Gayen and Bagha Bayen*.

**Keywords:** Fantasy, Reality, Realism, Socialism, Brecht.

Children's literature is a genre that is vastly dependent on fantastic elements that make it appealing to children and adults. The fantastic elements, on the surface, act as a model for psychologically cushioning that protects the child from the harsh realities of life and bestow moral messages to the masses. But the fantastical element alone cannot reveal the social, political, or moral message the fiction intends to spread. The fantasy element is hence paradoxical complicated by the presence of realism in Children's Literature. The use of realism, in the façade of fantasy, and larger than life characters, has helped writers to adhere to the real intention of children's literature. But realism is different from reality. Realism by definition is not actual reality, but an aesthetic way of representing the social realities, whereas fantasy happens on a more exaggerated departure from reality. Realism is a part of all kinds of writing be it fiction or non-fiction. The use of imagination in putting down thoughts by a non-fictional writer, while projecting the realities of life in his writing, is realism.

Realism of different types and genres have been discussed by writers like Brecht, Luckas, Balzac, and novelists like Henry Fielding, Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, Joyce, Amitav Ghosh, Marquez to name a few. In my paper I intend to first explain different form of realism by discussing Ian Watt's definition of realism, in *The Rise of The Novel* comparing and contrasting it with Brecht and Luckas's idea of realism as explained in *Bertolt Brecht: Against George Luckas*. Secondly I will discuss in brief the difference between reality and realism in a work of fiction. Thirdly, I will talk about the portrayal of reality and realism in children's literature, using socialist realism and Brecht's view on it. In order to discuss third part of my paper I will analyze film maker Satyajit Ray and his socialist- realist- fantasy film *Hirak Rajar Deshe*. The movie is adapted from Ray's father's collection of work for children name *Goopy Gayen and Bagha Bayen*.

Realism started in the middle of the 19th century against romanticism and historical art forms. The Realist artists used common subjects, surrounding for example like workplaces as their subjects. Emily Zola, Honre De Balzac and Flaubert are those naturalists who used these themes in their work of literature. Realism is a style that is by definition a form of depicting honest and un-glorified truth of life that the commoners, especially, the working class, the proletariat, could connect to. They despised the ideal beauty and glorified subjects of the past- the subjects used for Ancient Roman art and Greeks. Realism was faithfully based on the idea of "objective reality", without romanticizing or dramatizing the realities of life and society. Locke's idea of individuation was highly influential for realism writers, which stated

that a man's conceptual schemes, linguistic practices and beliefs should be known to the writer who can then faithfully portray it in his work of literature. Ian Watt claimed Locke to be one of the pioneers of realism, along with Descartes. Locke and Descartes both used modern realism in their work and influenced Watt's take on realism. According to Watt, modern realism - "begins from the position that the truth can be discovered by the individual through his senses."(12) But, in his *The Rise of the Novel*, he expounds upon other forms of realism for a better clarification on the genre. He defined formal realism, which he considered to be the base of Novel writing and the only way to portray the absolute truth. He calls it formal because it:

"...refers to any special literary doctrine or purpose, but only to a set of narrative procedures which are so commonly found together in the novel, and so rarely in other literary genres, that they may be regarded as typical of the form itself". (32)

Then he moves on to explain Scholastic and modern realism. The Scholastic realists dealt with universals, classes and abstractions as true realities. It denied particulars and its importance which was later discussed by modern realists. Modern realism disregarded universals, and absolute truth that has been glorified by the past. They believed in originality and new ideas. According to them with changing life and its situations one has to come up with new answers and cannot rely on the past. They enhanced on the particulars experience which was free from the traditional values. Realistic particularity, character and plot were introduced which instead of taking the audience and readers into the past, kept them in touch with reality. The world of metaphysics and romantic was revoked.

Bertolt Brecht, a follower of socialist realism believed in portraying the truth of society through realistic methods, and provided the proletariat audiences with enjoyment and relaxation. Brecht was a Marxist follower, and his Marxist aesthetics that departed him from the realism followed by Lucas and Balzac. Although Brecht followed the basic definition of realism which is defying the past history and romantics, he made certain changes in his formula. Lucas in 1920's and 1930's criticized Brecht and Benjamin for their anti-heritage positions. He condemned all those who failed to appreciate the popular roots and progressive quality of classical literature and the relationship of the aesthetic problems of literature and to national history: past, present and future. Brecht always believed in creating art and work of literature which followed the modernistic view of life and included complementary apparatuses. Lucas out rightly denied the validity of such beliefs. Brecht on the other hand, made condescending remarks about Lucas by Marx that through ancient Greek Literature,

mankind likes to go back to childhood. Brecht later in his life contemplated on his decision of denying the history completely. His works such as *Life of Galileo Galilee* had traditional traits. Though in his work he projected the problems of the proletariat class against the Pope, the hegemonic power and social hierarchy, he did not provide an absolute truth. Brecht contradicted Lucas further stating that his works were completed based on Balzac's theory of realism, and were too narrow to include the works of Kafka, Joyce and Beckett. Hence, Brecht can be seen as a reformer who has a wider vision for realism. His views and ideas may not be clear and objectified as compared to Lucas, who had a astringed and vivid explanation as to what socialist realism was to him.

Reality and realism, as I have explained in my introduction are words defining each other and its representation. When we use realism in a piece of work through different techniques of writing, we are projecting a mode of reality to the readers. Realism can be a part of fiction as well as non-fiction. Projecting reality as per se, in a piece of work involves imagination and fantasy. Literature cannot prevail without imagination. When words combined with thoughts, giving voice to ideas and imagination a piece of work is produced, whereas the way of portraying reality may vary. "Reality" is completely opposite of "fantasy". One validates the other by knowing what the other veritably meant. According to Derrida, meaning helps us differentiate between what is and not? Reality according to literary critics is something that existed, exists or will exist. It can be further defined as the totality of all the things, structures actual or conceptual, events and phenomena, whether observable or not. It can be a belief or convention of collective or individual experience.

In movies and work of literature today the portrayal of reality through realism has become a common aspect. The form of art has become the mouthpiece of not only mere entertainment and knowledge, but being empathetic to society and realities of life. Satyajit Ray is one such writer, director, musician who used realism in many of his movies that he directed for children. *Hirak Rajar Deshe* is one such movie where Satyajit Ray had brought in science fiction, folklore, nationalism, famine in Bengal and education together. The movie is a continuation of his grandfather Upendra Kishore Roychowdhary's famous work of fiction *Goopy Gayen and Bagha Bayen*. *Hirak Rajar Deshe* was the second movie of the trilogy that is inscribed as one of the most influential movies in every Bengali household. Every children in Bengal, is familiar with the dialogues of the movie, which are in rhyme form throughout. The story is about two friends Goopy and Bagha, who are given the "teen bor" (three boon) by the "bhooter raja" (the King of Ghosts). The three boon involved perennial food

provisions at the clap of their hands, magic shoes which could them anywhere they wanted and the power to sing songs and play drums. The third boon was precarious because according to the third boon whenever they sang songs, they would enchant their audience and turned them into stone. As soon the song was over, they would be back to life. This part was introduced in the first movie. In this part Goopy and Bagha takes on the HIRAK RAJA or The Diamond King. The Diamond king was corrupt and malicious. All those involved with him were his sycophants and bootlickers. The dialogues were all spoken in cadence form. The King practiced slavery, banned schools and education, and demanded tax from poor farmers. On watching the movie, one can identify all these problems as social representation of Bengal under imperialism. The condition of the poor farmers during the Bengal famine and the struggle of the working class proletariat is portrayed with “reality” in the movie. Ray was highly influenced by the class of values, old and new, in terms of human relationships. He showed the effect of education, which is at the centre of the storyline. It is to be noticed that all the characters spoke in rhymes, except the school teacher. Udayan, was a learned man and free from the adversaries of the King. His aim was to educate children so that they can differentiate between good and evil. But the cruel King in power said “*era joto beshi jane, toto kom mane*”(Hirak Raja'r Deshe), which meant “the more they learn, the less they agree to the king”. Ray, through the issue of education brought out the effect of Western Missionaries in Bengal. These missionaries were considered evil, and believed to have adverse effects on the society and culture of Bengal. The character of the Boiganik is also crucial. The invention of the “Mogoj Dholai”(Hirak Raja'r Deshe) machine by the Boiganik, for eradicating all new ideas and knowledge from the children's mind was a fine metaphor created by Ray. It was against the present scenario of Bengal and its hegemonic ideologies. Ray through the evil Boiganik's character brings forth the ill effects of scientific inventions as considered by the society then. The small one line dialogues in rhyme, in the text and the movie is very appealing. Ray used these sarcastic remarks to bring out the infringement in the society. For example:

“baki rakha khajna, motey bhalo kajna”

“porashona korey je, onaharey morey shey”( *Hirak Raja'r Deshe*)

Ray can be considered as a realist film maker, but he also he used fantasy and realism together in his Goopy Bagha Trilogy adhering to the best of both worlds. Through the use of

fantasy he provided a softer touch to the entire story, where the ending is conventional happily ever after. *Hirak Rajar Deshe* and the entire trilogy of Goopy Bagha, is considered as children's fiction. A milieu of fantasy and realism takes place in the trilogy guiding children to learn a moral lesson on one hand and on the other a message for the adults who are viewer of social biases and evil hegemonic ideologies. Every character and each detail in the text reveal a social message. Ray was a Marxist follower just like Brecht and he used his works to speak for the working class people. The Brainwashing machine can be seen as an outcome of evil use of Science. In the wrong hands, it can lead to great disasters. This was in response to the use of bombs and arms science helped in making. The machine here is used to brainwash all those who resented the evil King and questioned his authorities. Ray saw the pre and post-Independent Bengal and after the Partition of Bengal in 1971, he saw the social changes that lead to great upheaval in Bengal. Ray became a narrator of what he saw around him, the change and demolition of power that changed the society. The time during which this movie was made, there was riots in Bengal. According to Chidananda Das Gupta : "Calcutta of the burning trams, the communal riots, refugees, unemployment, rising prices and food shortage does not exist in Ray's films." (Ray and Tagore 72) But *Hirak Rajar Deshe* was actually an outcome of the condition of Bengal and the Naxalite movement of 1975. It did not have burning of trams and death of people, but it had burning of Udayan's house, his books, whipping the slaves, starving the workers and farmers. Ray had to keep in mind that the movie was a children's fiction. He could not represent "reality" in its raw form. He had to portray it with sugar coating for his little audiences. Another instance from the movie *Hirak Rajar Deshe*, which addressed the then condition of Bengal, was the scene where Udayan called out the names of each student. One can see that the class was a mixture of Hindu and Muslim students. Ray saw the condition of pre-and post-partition of Bengal and was aware of the religious rivalry that had evolved through time. He portrayed a society where, both communities once shared common knowledge and lifestyle.

Ray merged realism finely with fantasy in his movie *Hirak Rajar Deshe* in order to provide a narrative of the social, political and cultural conditions of Bengal before and after the British Raj. His use of fantastical elements as the good Ghost, magic, the brainwashing machine had made the text appealing to children, who also learnt about the social prejudices and transgression along with the importance of education. Through Udayan's education and teachings, the captured children in the mines managed to dethrone the evil King. It was not only Udayan's reality but Goopy Bagha's magic helped the children to overpower the King.

In the end, the King tastes his own medicine and is brainwashed. In the climax of the film *Hirak Raja'r Deshe*, the king joins the voice of his slaves and shouts:

“dori dhorey maro taan, raja hobey khan khan”

“Pull the rope to bring down the king”

Ray ends the story on a positive note, sending a message that together we can overpower any evil and have freedom of speech, thought and life. This was the overarching message of the story that could be read as freedom from the slavery of the East India Company from India. Ray's work is a *mélange* of historical elements, facts, fiction and fantastic. It is as much of a realistic work as it is a fantasy story. Brecht in his *The Life of Galileo Galilee* works out a similar story to bring out the realistic problems of the commoners through his use of realism. He does use history and a story of the past to relate to the problems of the common people. Ray's works supported all the elements of realism, but one should not overlook the fact that every children's fiction in a way is trying to portray the harsh realities of life, poverty, evil human beings, sufferings and death through larger than life magical characters, used as metaphors and illusions for the children to have a psychological satisfaction.

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