Tracing the 'Sense' behind 'Nonsense': A comparative study of selected texts of Sukumar Ray and Edward Lear

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Abstract

There has been a common tendency to place literary nonsense under the macrocosm of children's literature. However if the genre of literary nonsense is studied and analyzed with reference to the Socio-cultural and Political history of the age one realizes that 'Nonsense' is nothing but a garb, a looking glass which enables the writers to indirectly criticize the various shortcomings and limitations of the contemporary society. Through this paper I wish to analyze selected texts of Sukumar Ray and Edward Lear and attempt to understand the critical faculty of 'sense' behind their works that formed the genre of literary nonsense. I intend to carry out a close critical analysis of a few of their poems and short stories and attempt to understand the manner in Sukumar Ray - who belonged to pre-colonial Bengal and Edward Lear – who wrote during the Victorian Era – expressed their resistance towards a socio-political atmosphere which was violent, unjust, exploitive, grim and mechanized

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I

Children's literature as a separate genre has always been an "immensely influential" (Hunt. 1) aspect of literature. It has the young and tender minds as their target receptors and thus is "fundamental to functional and socio-cultural literacy" (ibid) and is "ideologically and politically potent" (ibid). Within the macrocosm of Children's Literature there are various microcosms like the fairy or wonder tale that form the very subgenre of Fantasy, or the nonsensical rhymes and tales that constitute the subgenre of "Literary Nonsense". The present paper intends to study the microcosm of Nonsense Literature and unearth the perfect *sense* that lies behind the apparently *nonsensical* discourses.

Before going any further with the discussion of literary nonsense, it is necessary to view the fundamental differences amidst fantasy and nonsense literature. Although there are lines of convergences as both are far away from the materialistic 'reality' and deal with elements that the every day world considers to be 'improbable' and 'impossible'. Yet, there is a divergence, which lies in the presence of perfect unity and even rationality within fantasy. Fantasy land like our own world has certain rules and everything that happens there makes perfect sense as they follow those rules. The logic of magic or marvel becomes a factor that makes the impossibilities of fantasy world as plausible and even to some extent sensible. Thus Harry Potter's world which is full of biting books and moving photographs and crying saplings might appear to be 'nonsensical' to the rational mind. However when seen and understood from the perspective of the fact that it all happens in Hogwarts which is an imaginary school of magic somewhere in Scotland concealed from being viewed by people (or Muggles) by magic, it appears to be a world that might have alternate or even contrasting realities but similar structure. This is where it ceases to be a 'Nonsense' tale and becomes a 'Fantasy' fiction.

On the other hand, whatever happens in the nonsense land is *nonsense* and not fantasy because, there is a conscious absence of logic and rationality even within its own territory. Unlike fantasy, in literary nonsense there is no presence of a factor like magic or marvel to justify the improbabilities and impossibilities that occur. Interestingly nothing in the land or cosmos of Nonsense even intends to make any conventional *sense* rather it only intends towards a conscious disruption of traditions

and conventions of all kinds. However it is pertinent to mention at this point that, logic and coherence are not absent from this land but are present with an absolutely different definition. The beings, the creatures and the events that form a part of this literature have no interrelation among themselves other than the fact that they are *Nonsense*. There is no coherent system that would give any kind of justification for the existence of nonsensical elements. However true logic and 'sense' of nonsense literature lies, only within its very nonsensical form which is revealed only when a close study of such texts are made, with reference to their socio-political and cultural contexts.

What could be those concerns? And why exactly was '*nonsense'*, during certain historical moments been used to make '*sense'*; Secondly, why – in spite of being devoid of any rationality - did this genre emerge and flourish as one that impressed, not just the child or the adolescent, but also the logical and matured mind of the adult? These are some of the questions with which I intend to begin my journey to examine the presence (or absence?) as well as nature of 'sense' lurking behind the nonsensical garb of literary nonsense. My paper attempts to closely analyze selective texts of Sukumar Ray and Edward Lear in comparative framework and thereby investigate the "sense" behind "Literary Nonsense".

<div align="center">II</div>

Nonsense literature or literary nonsense intends to project certain socio-political concerns by disrupting and redefining the existing conventions of language, reason and logic.

C.S. Lewis in his essay "On Three Ways of Writing for Children" writes that, writing for children is the "Best art-form for something you have to say" (Lewis. 18). Nonsense literature, whether rhymes, verse or prose, too seem to be a medium through which the author or the writer makes an attempt to use the comic mode in subversive ways to attack the stereotypes of colonial system. The works of both Sukumar Ray and Edward Lear within the paradigm of children's literature is thereby, political in intent.

The world in which Sukumar Ray lived and wrote was one that was witnessing colonial oppression and raising voices of resistance against the *Raj*. Ray being a creative artist, might have accepted the positive dimension of the European Enlightenment - this is apparent from the fact he himself was well-read in western literature and philosophy - but he did criticise the empire for its greed and violence. The dialectic of enlightenment has been problematized in the European context too and the apprehensions that Ray had within the default 'renaissance' of Bengal or the crisis of modernity had common resonance worldwide. They can be summarised as follows :

- Critique of industrialization

- Mechanical culture

- Destruction of agrarian societies

- Creation of 'babu' culture

- Totalitarian impulses

- Destruction of individualities.

Enlightenment, according to Adorno and Holkheimer, established superiority of 'man' over 'nature' through rigid reason and inflexible logic which made it totalitarian and despotic. Thus, when Adorno and Horkheimer in their essay "*The Concept of Enlightenment*" critique it for being "totalitarian" (Adorno And Horkheimer.6) they criticise those aspects, that made Enlightenment, dictatorial and it is their experience of Fascism in Germany that made them critical of modernity too. It is this very aspect of Enlightenment and colonization that several pre-independence native authors critiqued. Sukumar Ray too was a creative artist of the time who was concerned with foregrounding anti-colonial and pedagogical methodologies. Thus probably he wrote Children's literature with the objective of rousing critical consciousness, primarily by problematizing the role of reason.

The poem with which I wish to begin my discussion is "*Kimbhut*" or "Super Beast". Ray was probably concerned with the thriving *babu culture[1]* of Bengal that was doing nothing but making educated Bengalis a perfect subject for the colonial empire to exploit. The education and exposure to European – primarily English – language culture and custom was being popularised through British pedagogical apparatus
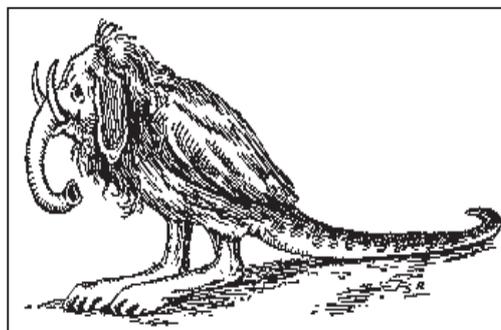

Figure 1 – Sukumar Ray's Illustration for "Kimbhut"

for its own benefit and was being embraced with wide open arms by the natives because it gave them employment as well as a false sense of status and pride. This led to a situation where these native individuals began neglecting their own indigenous customs and traditions and eventually began suffering from a crisis of identity. Through the poem he critiques this very tendency of

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[1] *Babus* were the by-product of Bengal renaissance which was a socio-cultural and religious movement that encouraged middle class Bengalis – especially men - to get acquainted with the western literature and philosophies. Though it was intended to be an intellectual awakening yet it contrastingly strengthened the British Raj as middle class Bengali men now well versed in English language and literature became loyal employees of the colonial administration.

educated middle class Bengalis who were fast losing their unique individuality to English culture, custom and tradition.

The creature in the poem – apparent from the poet's own illustration - is extremely depressed as it desires for many things that are absent in his own self but present in others. Interestingly when it gets all that it ever desired for, it becomes more miserable than before as now it is devoid of any identity of its own. Ray, through this poem critiques the, then existing colonial educational apparatus, and comments against those natives, who like the *Kimbhut* were not satisfied with their own conditions, customs and traditions and through the education, desired and even imitated the colonial manners. He thus provoked an alternative current of thinking using humour as a tool to critique - though in a comic tone – the fact that blindly embracing the colonial custom and manners would only make one as miserable as the identity less *Kimbhut* who is only fit to be either laughed at or made fun of. The doleful moan of the *Kimbhut* in the end "'I can't be a moth or a horse or a snake . . . Oh what can I be?' " (Ray 17) intends to remind the intense woe of being left in the world devoid of any identity.

The poem also expresses the plight of the modern man in the industrialised and mechanised world which causes absolute dehumanization. The colonised subject, like the 'Kimbhut' has no identity or individuality of his own and is caught within a sense of nothingness. He is alienated, not just from his work or labour but also from his own self and thus is human no more. The question "Oh what can I be?" (Ray. 17) that *Kimbhut* asks itself seem to be the very quest that remains unquenched in the mind of the identity less modern man.

The questions that comes forth at this point is, why did Ray select the very form of Nonsense to express his anti colonial concerns and why did he choose children and not adults as his primary readers? Was Sukumar Ray using *nonsense*, to attract less attention of the Raj and its pedagogical tools against which he was trying to manifest his resistance?

In yet another poem titled as "*Huko Muko Hangla*" or "The Lug-Headed Loon", Ray, critiques the very accepted notion of rationality and conventionality which, during his time were set and decided by the *Raj*. The creature in the poem is distressed as by following the conventions of rationality, he cannot swat flies that were sitting right at the centre of his back, as the two tails of his worked only in two directions. The reader might laugh at *Huko Muko Hangla's* foolishness of not using his
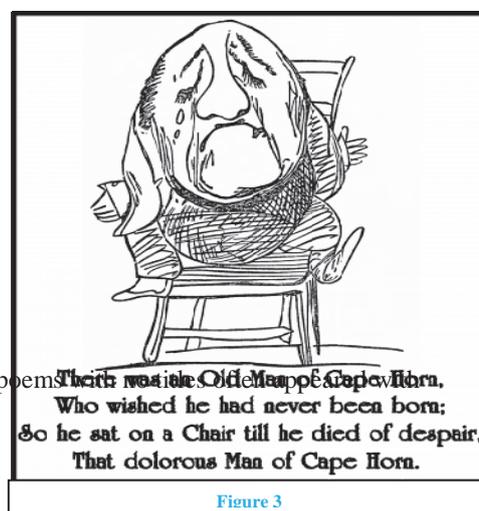

Figure 2 – "Huko Muko Hangla"

own brains and blindly following the conventions of thought laid down through the mechanical rationality that was being fore-grounded, but the laughter ceases when one realises that he/she was nothing different from *Huko Muko Hangla* as what one in everyday life did, was nothing but to follow the conventions and behave according to the rules and conventions laid down by the hegemonic powers. Thus through the poem Ray attempted to raise the consciousness of the fact that there is a need to initiate critical thought which will lead one to redefine every accepted notion of conventions and mechanical reason.

The poem can also be interpreted as a spoof on the affluent aristocracy which possess everything in excess yet are neither happy nor satiated. Their abundance often leaves them with a generous share of leisure time, which they often spend, despairing about insignificant things (like the very creature of the poem). Another semantene in the poem is the phrase, "Afimer Thanadar" translated as "inspector of drugs" (Ray. 20) in the Bangla text the phrase which is a reference to his maternal uncle works like an oxymoron, as like the narcotic potential of opium - a common addictive in Bengal - the trade of which was promoted by the Raj during its rule has a double meaning. Opium causes a sense of stupor and the colonised subject ironically was caught in the awe of this stupor inducing drug that made one forgetful of ones condition of existence. There is not a single representation in Bangla that portrays the positive potential of opium like De Quincy's essay or the embalming influence under which Coleridge could write a *Kubla Khan*. In our native context opium trade pauperised the peasant community like it is now doing in the context of globalization.

If Sukumar Ray's works reflected and critiqued certain socio-political aspects of *his* world – which was the pre-colonial Bengal - then the prose and verse of the English poet of Edward Lear - too did something similar in reference to the Victorian age. The two poets belonged to two different worlds at two very different chronotopes. What binds them together is, not just the genre of Nonsense literature but also those interesting conjunctures that emerge from their conscious or unconscious, expression of concerns that affected their respective worlds. Lear's poems were deeply critical of the colonial enlightenment apparatus. The poem about the old man of Cape Horn[2] (**Figure 3**) is a critique of the industrial

There was an Old Man of Cape Horn,
Who wished he had never been born;
So he sat on a Chair till he died of despair,
That dolorous Man of Cape Horn.

Figure 3

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[2] Edward Lear's poems are often referred to as "Limericks". These short poems were the Old Man of Cape Horn, humorous illustrations that highlighted the thought behind the poems.

revolution that made the western world utilitarian and materialistic. This was also an age of scientific experiments and innovations which indeed were giving fatal blows to the deep rooted faiths and beliefs of man. Thus the poem radiates the quandary of man who finds the world that questions his faith, too rational and pragmatic for his existence and thus the old man of the poem, "wished he had never been born" and "died of despair" (Lear 47). It also expresses a particular attitude towards life that fails to find any meaning in their existence and live and die of complaining. Interestingly, all the three poems converge at a common point as they all express the emotion of despair. If Ray's characters seem to reflect the misery of the colonised being who was losing not just his freedom but also identity and individuality at the hands of the powerful colonisers then Lear's old man seem to be manifesting gloominess and pessimism to which the industrial England of Victorian Era was subjected to.

The emotion of despair that mirrored respective socio-political atmosphere was not the only string that linked the works of these two authors. An in-depth critical analysis of their selected works in a comparative framework reveals that not just the intent but the style of critiquing the dominant exploitive power of the society to is an interesting link. In another poem of Sukumar Ray titled as "*Bapuram Sapure*", translated as "Snakes Alive", one witnesses a situation where the narrator of the poem – an unknown entity – requests Bapuram the snake charmer to get two snakes who are absolutely harmless solely because the unknown narrator wants to beat them and turn them cold. Through this poem Sukumar Ray portrays yet another concern. The snake that is a symbol of fertility in the context of Bengal and also worshipped as the vengeful mother goddess 'Manosha', is nothing but Satan to the coloniser's mind. Mating snakes might be auspicious to some sections of society in Bengal but to a colonial mind they are nothing more than the Arch Foe. Thus when the pair is bought by the unknown entity of the narrator, just with a motive to beat them with "cudgel" and "knock them cold" (Ray.14) the entity seem to represent the violent hegemonic powers of the contemporary times who used violence as a means to establish its superiority. The unprovoked violence compels one to realize that the poem depicts the cruel subjugation and exploitation of not just the body of the colonised man but also of his faiths and beliefs. Interestingly this unknown cruel entity of the narrator finds its parallel in one of Edward Lear's poem
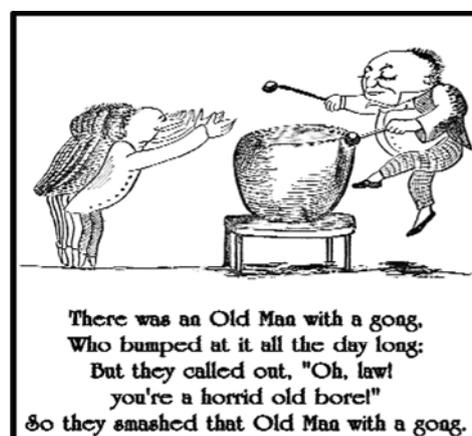

There was an Old Man with a gong,
Who bumped at it all the day long;
But they called out, "Oh, law!
you're a horrid old bore!"
So they smashed that Old Man with a gong.

Figure 4

about an 'old man with a gong' (**Figure 4**)**.** In this poem the gong of an old man is disliked by a similar unknown entity, '*they*', who call him a 'bore' and then, "*they,* smashed the old man with a gong" (*Lear*. 24). The act of smashing the old man who played with the gong, depicts, the irrational violence of the power apparatus portrayed here as the agency of the "they". It overtly reflects the fact that whatever is not liked by "*them*" would not be allowed to exist, just as in Ray's poem the pair of snake was not allowed to live by the narrator. What is the identity of this entity "they" that appears in Lear's poem? What authority does it have to impart violence on poor innocent people? To seek a possible answer, one needs to concentrate on Lear's contemporary context. Lear was born in London in 1812 and was the subject of an empire that was the major imperial power of the time. It was an era of establishing the supremacy of the colonial empire which it did, by brutally exploiting, everything- that did not walk the path illuminated by the colonial torch. Thus, there is indeed a definite possibility, of the empire being represented by the entity, "*they*". By smashing the old man's gong and by extension his musicality Lear seem to depicted the exact condition of not only the old and the poor of England but also of the various colonies whose tradition, culture, custom and art was being systematically wiped out.

The next poem to be analyzed in this context is Sukumar Ray's poem "Pumpkin Puff" or "*Kumro Potash*". Like Lear, Ray too critiques the unquestioned authority of the colonial regime and the impact it had on the colonised milieu. The poem which is about an amusing creature *Kumro Potash* according to whose behaviour the whole town has to tune its own conduct, might appear to be a true replica of nonsense literature but a close study of the poem reveals the fact that the figure of *Kumro Potash* is nothing but a caricature of the **British Raj**. Through the poem the poet makes fun of the colonised subject who does not realise the meaninglessness and futility of abiding by the rules and methods of the colonial establishment, just like those who did strange things, just because *Kumro Potash* danced or moaned or ran. Another pertinent aspect of the poem is that it intends to critique the *babu culture* of Bengal. The strange behaviour of the townsmen appear to be a satire, on the behaviour of all those people employed as clerks and petty administrators – *babus* - of the British government, who too like the very town people were both awestruck and afraid of their bosses and did whatever they could to keep them contended.

If Ray was critiquing the colonial system from outside then Lear it seems was doing something similar, but from the

There was a Young Lady whose eyes
Were unique as to color and size;
When she opened them wide,
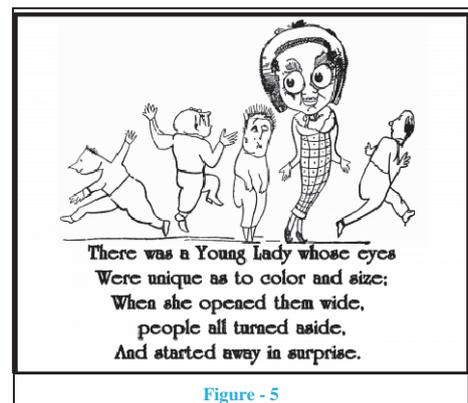people all turned aside,
And started away in surprise.

Figure - 5

other side. For Lear the British colonial power was the dominant ideology of the society that ruled and governed the masses with a heavy hand. Several prejudices functioned in the English society of Nineteenth century and Racial discrimination was an integral part of the same. Edward Lear, in the poem about a young lady with unique **eyes** seems to portray this very aspect (**Figure 5**). The young lady whose "unique" eyes, surprised "people" (Lear. 35) and made them run away from her, depicts the treatment given to the racial "other". The shape and colour of eyes are definite markers of ones race and, if the woman in the poem is being treated as an outcaste by others, because her eyes are different in colour and shape, then it is indeed nothing but an expression of racial discrimination.

 A glimpse of the intense cruelty and brutality with which the colonial empire dealt with its colonies can be seen in the short story by Lear "*The Story of the Four Little Children Who Went Round the World*" which describes a fascinating sea voyage of four children. The rhinoceros on whose back they lived and cooked for nearly 18 weeks, was killed and stuffed as a "token of their grateful adherence" (Lear. 216). The dreadful end that the rhinoceros of the story reached is the very end of numerous colonies which were captured, exploited and annihilated by the British Empire. The colonial empire had the power of machine and technology and thus the colonies that were invaded, were as vulnerable and lucrative as the "ready cooked" (Lear. 207) and "shrimp sauce" (Lear. 208) smeared fishes that inhabited a narrow part of the sea and became an easy catch for the four children. Violet's act of giving them the woollen frock is similar to the act of giving independence to a colony or a country when nothing much is left for the colonisers to fatten themselves anymore. Like Ray, Lear's works too yield perfect meaning even when read without their contexts.

Another interesting poem that manifests another struggle that the Victorian England witnessed was the rigid and unbending nature of the patriarchal structure. This is visible in the poem about a certain Lady of Lucca (**Figure 6**). The poem by Lear problematizes the existing gender equations of the society. During the 19C women in Victorian England were stepping out of their homes to work, yet the society continued to be rigidly patriarchal. Though women at that time began working either as governesses or as teachers or became authors who published their works yet it was the domestic domain that decided her worth. Any act of defiance of conventional gender roles were snided upon.

There was a Young Lady of Lucca,
Whose lovers completely forsook her;
She ran up a tree, and said "Fiddle-de-dee!"
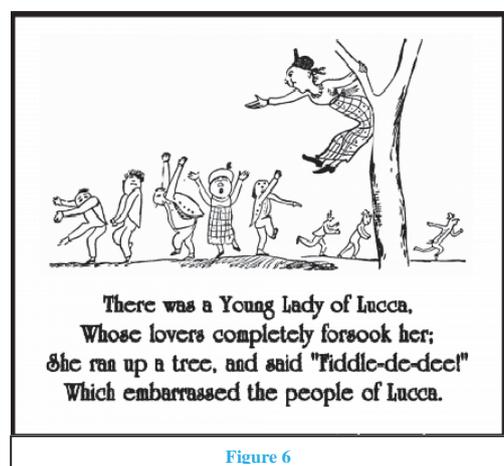Which embarrassed the people of Lucca.

Figure 6

Thus in the poem, this poor lady of Lucca was forsaken by her lovers and thus must have suffered from extreme betrayal and loneliness. However when she "ran up a tree" (Lear. 46) to say "Fiddle-De-Dee" (Lear. 46) - either because, she wanted to express the extreme misery that she went through or that she desired to show her lovers that she did not care about them - the patriarchal society or the "People of Lucca" (Lear. 46) was 'embarrassed'. The illustration of the poem by Lear himself which shows men (and even a woman) running away from the lady of Lucca further highlights that things were probably fine till the poor woman meekly suffered, but were "embarrassed" (Lear. 46) when the woman broke the rules and decided to express her opinions and views vocally.

<center>**III**</center>

Literary nonsense continues to be a rich source of amusement both for the adults as well as children. Its subversive content and matured humour created through syntactic and semantic play of language probably allowed adults to make certain mimetic connections with their contemporary times and thus was often enjoyed more by adults than children. This section of the paper would make an attempt to analyse this very fact.

For true growth and development of a human body, there is a need for a balanced diet. Peter Dickens, in his essay a *"Defence of Rubbish",* writes that it is often difficult to survive only on plums and "any rational reading system needs to include a considerable amount of pap or roughage" (*Dickinson*. 80). It can thus be said that adult mind is over fed with the heavy diet of logic and probability. Nonsense thus, comes not just as a welcome change of taste, but also as that necessary roughage that breaks down the chunks of rationality and makes it more digestible. However, there is also a possibility that it is this Nonsense literature that uses the mechanism of representing sense in nonsensical fashion that nourishes the mind with necessary nutrients thereby saving the mind from being sick due to an over diet of rationality and reason.

Literary nonsense disrupts the existing standards of expressions, just to give the suggestion of the possibility of a different and alternate way. Thus when an adult mind reads them, he is bound to experience things that he would never come across in his own matured world. The mind that is firmly tied with the rough ropes of rules, logic, reason and conventions, when reads nonsense literature is actually, freeing itself from any such bindings and is (probably after a long time) breathing free and fresh air. Thus along with awakening the human mind about the possibility of existence of an alternate definition of logic and rationality the form gives the strained matured mind

the fun and excitement of doing things in the so called "wrong" way. Therefore one realizes that Sukumar Ray in his short story "*Ha Ja Ba Ra La*" or the "*Topsy Turvy Tale*" does not just challenge the conventional rationality rather, successfully turns it on its head. Through his 'nonsensical' characters and situations he attempts to establish the idea of the 'possible *impossibility*' and the 'impossible *possibility*'. The nonsensical account of a simple handkerchief suddenly becoming a cat that not only speaks but even sniggers and winks, starts making perfect sense when one realises that all Ray is trying to do here is, nothing but disrupt the existing truths and certainties and challenge the notions of scientific rationality and thus try to create a scope for thinking beyond the existing rules and regulations. Truths and facts, often accepted as absolutes – for example mathematical calculations - too are scrutinised by Ray. Thus in the story, we are informed by the accountant bird that, 7 multiplied by 2 is 14 only at a particular period of time. Any time before or after, the result would be either "13 rupees 14 annas and 3 pies" or "14 rupees 1 anna and 9 pies" (Ray 49).

This form of literature also frees the hidden child within every matured mind by giving them the pleasure of imagining things that the outside world considers to be impossible and thus when one reads the sniggering cat's strange directions to reach Tibet in Sukumar Ray's "Topsy Turvy Tale" or "Ha ja Ba Ra La" , "here's Calcutta, and here's Diamond Harbour a little to the south, and here's Ranaghat a little to the north, and then presto! You're in Tibet! Straight roads, an hour and a quarter's drive-just say the word." (Ray 47). This simple description on the one hand makes one aware of the world of a child, for whom nothing is difficult or impossible. Interestingly on the other hand the description which inevitably reminds one of   peasant like description of distance, also highlights the uncomplicated and amusing nature of the lost agrarian world.

Similarly on witnessing the various islands visited by the four children in Lear's story "*The Story Of Four Little Children Who Went Round The World*" that were either made of water surrounded with earth full of "veal cutlets" (Lear. 206) and "chocolate drops" (Lear.206) or had "deep pits full of Mulberry Jam" (Lear. 215), the adult mind is made to lose its rigid codes of conduct and indulge in childhood fantasies and floods of laughter and amusement and thus, liberate itself from the mechanistic existence of the post industrial world.

IV

Children's literature in general and nonsense literature in particular, has often been blamed for filling a child's mind with fancies and illusions. They are said to be responsible for taking a child away from the world of reality by stuffing them with strange and improbable ideas. The fact that is

often overlooked here is that these ideas, rather than "dulling" (Lewis. 22) or disillusioning the mind of a child, only enriches it further by giving it, as C.S Lewis in his essay "*On Three Ways Of Writing"* writes "new dimension of depth" (Lewis. 22). Thus if the handkerchief becoming a sniggering cat in Ray's "*Ha ja ba ra la"* or the very sea journey of the four children in Edward Lear's short story "*The Story Of Four Little Children Who Went Round The World*" was enchanting for a child then as Lewis suggests, he does not begin to despise any of them in his real life. Rather for him every sea journey or any house cat or a normal cotton handkerchief, post reading of the text, would become enchanting. What *nonsense literature* does is, to provoke the minds of the young reader to creatively think. These stories and poems with strange animals and strange encounters provoke a child to desire, and he is "happy in the fact of desiring" (Lewis. 22). Like the reader who gains the freedom to think and imagine the author of nonsense literature too is free to experiment with every existing convention and create a grammar of his own by breaking the rules of the same.

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9. Wikipedia.com.LiteraryNonsense. 26 May 2008.

     http//en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literary_nonsense

References for Images

Figure 1 – "Kimbhut". The illustration was provided by the poet himself along with the text of the peom as published in *Abol Tabol.*

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/88/Kimbhut.gif

Figure 2 – "Huku Muku Hangla". This too like the previous image was also drawn by Sukumar Ray. This poem too is a part of *Abol Tabol.*

http://www.parabaas.com/translation/database/translations/essays/sukumar_hnuko.jpg

Figure 3 – Edward Lear's poem. http://www.lear200.com/there-was-old-man-cape-horn

Figure 4 - Edward Lear's poem. http://www.lear200.com/there-was-old-man-gong

Figure 5 – Edward Lear's poem. http://www.lear200.com/there-was-young-lady-whose-eyes

Figure 6 – Edward Lear's poem. http://www.lear200.com/there-was-young-lady-lucca