



Quests Of The Mind And Spirit: Tintin And Shonku In Contrast

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Abstract: : Despite their dissimilar career orientations, the characters of both Herge's Tintin and Satyajit Ray's Professor Shonku are adventurers in their own right. However, their divergent cultural and political inheritance become manifest in the different ways in which they view their destination as adventurers. The politics of dominance and monotheistic standardization that subtly works beneath the benevolent endeavours of Tintin are replaced with a philosophical and spiritual journey that becomes the ascetic Shonku. While Shonku freely seeks knowledge and enlightenment, Tintin is compelled to oblige the hapless multitude waiting to be emancipated by him. If 'team-Tintin' (Tintin and his companions) collectively form a Western-gaze conglomerate, then 'team-Shonku' (Shonku and his fellow travellers) represent an altogether diverse vision where Western empirical science fuses in harmony with a national-cultural version of Universal knowledge. This paper aims at initiating a comparative study of the separate ideologies of Tintin and Shonku and their respective squads, as evinced through the various exploits of the two men, and to investigate how discrete their attitudes are towards the quests which they embark on.

Key words: Seeker, Emancipator Gaze, Team, Enlightenment, Universalism.

Though the history of children's literature in Europe may be traced back to the late sixteenth century, it was the nineteenth century that heralded a golden age in the field of literature for children. *Encyclopedia Britannica* observes in the appearance of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the beginning of the Golden Age of English children's literature - an age that was "characterized by a literary level decisively higher than that previously achieved"; in "creation of characters now permanent dwellers in the child's imagination..." and the works of creative writers who applied to literature for children "standards as high as those ordinarily applied to mainstream literature". (Clifton Fadiman, 1998). Given the era's socio-political heritage in the form of strong colonial and expansionist interests, the literature of the age was often influenced anew with the idea of a wayfaring hero exemplified in the figure of Tennyson's activist hero Ulysses, for whom "...all experience is an arch where through / Gleams that yet untraveled world whose margin fades/ Forever and for ever" as he moves forward (Tennyson, lines 19- 21). Narratives depicting such quests for knowledge and experience leading on to the discovery of 'New Worlds' to dominate and rule over, influenced classics like Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1610). However, it was especially in the mid-nineteenth century, when mass literacy had become a reality that 'adventure' became a popular subgenre in children's fiction in Europe. Interestingly the adventure fiction form written for children shared two common narrative motifs -- first, the recording of the travels of some people moving from one place to another under the leadership of a White protagonist; and second, an innate urge to solve a problem or to investigate a crime which has occurred in one of the places they visit. It is this notion of 'adventure' that forms the staple of early to mid-twentieth-century children's fiction as observed in *The Adventure Series* written by Enid Blyton:

"The best way to treat obstacles is to use them as stepping stones. Laugh at them, tread on them, and let them lead you to something better." (Mr. Gilliano's Circus, 171)

In India and especially in Bengal, the tradition of children's adventure stories can be traced back to Bhubanmohan Roy's unfinished novel "Sunderbane Sat Batsar", written sometime in the late nineteenth century. However, as Rohini Mitra mentions in her blog article "Bengali Adventure Stories", the first novel that deserves to be called the first full-fledged adventure text in Bengali was Hemendra Kumar Roy's "JakherDhan" (1924). As will be revealed from a close reading of these early works of fiction, the Bengali authors often sought to instil a sense of nationalism in the mind of their young readers even while telling stories of worthy protagonists capable of taking on the challenges of the world both mentally and physically as they journeyed forth with an insatiable quest for discovering and experiencing the unknown. A thematic undercurrent that runs through these narratives is that even on a treasure hunt, it is never the lure of gold but the passion for adventure that drives them forth. By the time the heritage of this rich tradition touched the genius of Satyajit Ray in the second half of the twentieth century, he had had the advantage of being acquainted with the White man's adventure fiction too. As acknowledged by Sandip Ray in a recent article serialised in *Anandamela* ["Amar Baba Satyajit", September 20, 2021], his father was an avid fan of Tintin comics. In fact, the influence of Tintin's adventures on Ray is evident from the way he sought to revive the children's periodical *Sandesh* in 1961, starting with the Science Fiction-Adventure stories of Professor Shonku. (Ray 13-15)

Shonku and Tintin belong to different professional fields in that while the former is a scientist and an inventor, the latter is a journalist. But what resonates in the hearts of these two diverse protagonists is an unquenchable thirst for knowledge. Only, these men hail from such culturally diverse backgrounds that the gaze with which they approach the objects of their quest makes them distinct from each other. The creator of Shonku, though an avowed admirer of Tintin, allows his protagonist to see the world through a lens coloured by the traditions of his own native culture. It is because of this that the urge to influence which is explicit in the Tintin stories becomes a philosophical urge towards the acquisition of knowledge (*jigyāsā*) in the Shonku tales. As a corollary to this, Shonku does not wish to usurp, rule or salvage; but rather to serve and to remain as a seeker of knowledge (*gyān*).

The theme of exploration in Hergé's Tintin manifests itself through the portrayal of the various characters in the series. Tintin himself typifies the elements of information, intelligence and quest in playing the role of a journalist-adventurer. At the same time there is implicit in the figuration of Tintin of a White man's sense of supremacy which guides him in his actions. Captain Haddock, with his newfound riches and Marlinspike, post the episodes of *The Secrets of the Unicorn* and *Red Rackham's Treasure* represent the financial affluence of the typical European landed gentry, whose agency is inevitable for the aiding of the explorer figure. Haddock himself is also an explorer and a sailor or a mariner. Cuthbert Calculus represents Western science and technology, knowledge systems that were often the enabling drives behind the entire colonial enterprise. In a sense, Thomson and Thompson contribute to the elements of law and order that the coloniser took along to discipline the supposedly unruly natives. Senhor Oliveira de Figueira an expert Portuguese salesman, who can trade almost anything, is a version of the Western explorer who approaches faraway lands with the intention of commerce. And last but not the least, there is Snowy the faithful dog which is the perpetual companion of Tintin. In its completeness, this 'team-Tintin' represents the Western Gaze conglomerate. If they are all united as thematic blocks, the resulting persona would conform exactly to the image of a typical Western imperialist and coloniser.

In stark contrast to what has been labelled as 'team-Tintin', there stands 'team-Shonku'. Different from Professor Calculus, Shonku himself is a scientist from the colonial periphery. He has received the White man's education in Science, having completed his B.Sc. with Honours degrees in two subject disciplines – Physics and Chemistry from the University of Calcutta. As he is professor in Scottish Church College, there can be no doubt that he is a man deeply aware of modern science. Yet, alongside possessing a rational mind, he is deeply interested in paranormal activities, the secret Sanskrit mantra of 'Sanjeevani', alchemy, unicorns, dragons and spectres. Instead of disregarding such things as superstitions, Shonku insists that modern science is only yet to find a rational explanation for such phenomena. He also stresses that that once science is able to comprehend or to explain all that is dismissed out of hand as irrational, the investigation of all these would all be accepted as topics of legitimate studies. An explanation of this basic philosophical difference between *Gyan/ Vigyan* and the Science of the West has been proposed by Subhash Sharma in an essay entitled "Science, Vigyan and Gyan: From Newton to Nirvana". Sharma argues here that "While science relies on Senses, Vigyan (Vishesh Gyan) can be acquired through the 'mind'. He also adds that 'gyan' both in terms of its metaphysical and spiritual meaning, is acquired through 'consciousness.' It is because of this that Shonku admires the unexplained secrets of the Universe with an open mind, irrespective of their geopolitical origins

or orientations. In fact, whenever Shonku embarks on a journey across various civilisations, he travels with the gaze of a seeker of knowledge and enlightenment. Indeed, as Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay observes in his essay “On Mythologem: Kalpaigyan and the Question of Imperial Science”, Shonku in his pursuit of Knowledge is “at once a scientist/inventor and a mystic.”(Chattopadhyay 445)

In stories like “Baghdad’er Baksho” and “Egyptio Atonko”, Shonku bows down to the archetypical knowledge (*gyān*) of ancient civilizations in veneration. The ascetic shows no inclination towards explaining the mysteries of these ancient civilizations with the empiricism of Science. He is entirely content to remain as a seeker of enlightenment. A deep sense of respect for knowledge and a total absence of a Supremist gaze on the part of this adventurer from an Eastern land, allows him to win the trust of locals like Al Habbal in “Baghdad’er Baksho”; even as Professor Goldstein’s overreaching and indomitable urge to possess the object of his quest drives him insane. In the story “Egyptio Atonko” too, Shonku gives up on his idea to tinker further with the Mummy when he senses some sort of a supernatural resistance to his endeavour. Unlike the quintessential overreaching western scientist Victor Frankenstein in Mary Shelley’s novel who fails to bridle the “enticements of Science” (*Frankenstein* 39), Shonku knows where to stop.

To aid Shonku in his spiritual and philosophical pursuit of knowledge, Ray sketches an orchestra of characters who frequently join him in his adventures. Unlike Tintin’s faithful dog, Shonku has Newton, who is not merely a namesake of the most acclaimed scientific minds of the modern world, but is also a being with a mind of its own. Prahllad on the other hand is Shonku’s devoted attendant but he of course does not enjoy the status of a companion. His ignorance often brings him to the rescue of Shonku, mostly because he fails to estimate the seriousness of the dangers ahead. Avinash, the neighbour of Shonku, is as indestructible as his name in his disregard for Science and Technology. He often draws the attention of Shonku to the mysteries of the mundane world and so helps to expand the horizon of the seeker. He accompanies Shonku in his adventures with the simple purity of a child in his enthusiasm. Professor Saunders, a British Biologist, is the first scientist from the Colonial centre to acknowledge the genius of Shonku in “Swarnapornee”. It is he who introduces Shonku to the circle of Imperial Science. Another British scientist who befriends Shonku and is often very protective about him is Professor John Summerville. There is also Wilhelm Kroll who is a German Anthropologist with a deep interest in the paranormal and the occult. Thus, when Shonku brings along his national and cultural version of Science to the Colonial centre, Kroll’s stance renders credence to the former. And lastly there is Nakur Babu, a simpleton from an unknown village of Bengal, who is suddenly endowed with multiple supernatural powers after an encounter with a ball lightning. He is, in other words, a living embodiment of the mysteries of the universe which western science is yet to acknowledge. It is noticeable that as a team of adventurers, this group is not restrained by any boundaries of politics, geography or culture. Coming together from the various rungs of human society they are both diverse and unique as a team. And since they have no final goal predetermined by a fixed school of belief, this diverse group can enjoy the journey they embark on.

In virtually all the adventures of Tintin, the characteristic spirit of the titular hero’s culture and time is manifested through his attitude and aspirations. Thus, Tintin rambles through the flora and the fauna of the Congo, goes big game hunting, and teaches the Congolese children, without any hesitation, that Belgium is their faraway country (“Tintin in Congo”). Quite significantly, he becomes the “Boula Matari” or the all-powerful and good White man in the land of dark and ignorant natives by performing a number of ‘disinterested’ actions like exposing with the help of western technologies of recording and video-graphy, the wicked witch doctor of ‘Babaorom’ who kept the “ignorant and stupid people” (*Tintin in Congo* 25) of the land in his “power”; cured an African native child of his “Juju” with his western medicine; and ultimately unearthed a criminal racket of diamond smuggling run by the American gangster Al Capone. And ultimately with the ‘auctorite’ of a White man, he chooses his loci across India, Congo, China, Mexico, Peru, Tibet and Saudi Arabia to conquer, exploit and standardise. Interestingly, in “The Seven Crystal Balls” the White man is shown to be in awe of the malicious forces and ominous forebodings of the unknown lands. But he is able to solve the problem in *The Prisoners of the Sun* that follows. The White man thus emerges victorious by gulling the ignorant but malevolent natives of the Inca land using their own faith against them. Curiously a civilization that had developed around a worship of the Sun god, had apparently escaped noticing the solar eclipse! Thus, the Incas could be easily duped into submission before the White man who observes the world from the vantage point of a superior education. In fact in Hergé’s own words, “Tintin is me wanting to be heroic and perfect...” “Tintin is me... my eyes, my feelings, my lungs, my guts... I believe I am the only person able to animate him, the only person able to give him a soul.” Hence it goes without saying that Tintin was born out of Hergé’s desire to etch a perfect hero for the White man’s universe, but of course one without

a cape. Thus, wherever Tintin visits he is ideologically obliged to return triumphant as a salvager of the miserable indigenous communities, because introducing them to 'true knowledge' is believed to be the White man's prerogative.

Shonku's ideological frames free him from any such obligation. For him, truth is layered and reality can be experienced in its multiple shades and possibilities under diverse circumstances. Hence, the mythical creatures of "Ek Shringa Obhijan" are perceivable realities in the mythical land of 'Dunglung Do', but they fade into oblivion when one tries to bring them into our world of reason. This disappearance does not make these creatures unreal but rather opens our minds to the acceptance of multiple versions of truth. The satisfaction of the '*jigyāsā*' supersedes the urge to grasp and to possess.

As a consequence, Shonku and Tintin are largely different from each other even though they are both adventurers. Their distinct ethos renders them with different personalities, philosophies and phenomenologies. Tintin and his team may have influenced or inspired Satyajit Ray, but Shonku and his friends commence on a unique journey in which his perceptual horizons expand as his own rich cultural past and indigenous vision is infused and enriched with the values of modern science.

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