Right(ing) the Writing: An Exploration of Satyajit Ray’s Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne

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Abstract

The act of writing, owing to the permanence it craves, may be said to be in continuous interaction with the temporal flow of time. It continues to stimulate questions and open up avenues for discussion. Writing people, events and relationships into existence is a way of negotiating with the illusory. But writing falters. This paper attempts a reading of Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne in terms of power politics through the lens of the manipulation of written codes and inscriptions in the film. Identities and cultures are constructed through inscriptions and writings. But in the wrong hands, this medium of communication which has the potential to bring people together may wreck havoc on the social and political system. Writing, or the misuse of it, in the case of the film, reveals the nature of reality as provisional. If writing gives a seal of authenticity to a message, it can also become the casualty of its own creation.

Key words: Inscription, Power, Politics, Writing, Social system
Introduction

*Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* by Satyajit Ray is a fun film for children of all ages; it ran to packed houses in West Bengal for a record 51 weeks and is considered one of the most commercially successful Ray films. With lead actors Tapen Chatterjee (Goopy) and Rabi Ghosh (Bagha), the film won the President’s Gold and Silver Medals in 1970. The film follows the adventure of impoverished peasants Goopy and Bagha, who, having been exiled from their villages, are transformed by supernatural intervention into wandering minstrel-magicians who prevent a war. The story may be said to be a fantasy about the absurdity of war. The viewers live vicariously through the characters of Goopy and Bagha, who strive to overcome the forces of evil through the three boons conferred on them by the King of Ghosts. There is a strong social, political and ideological message hidden within the fantastic imagery in the film (Sarkar 1999). Ben Nyce, in the book *Satyajit Ray: A Study of his films* (1988) writes that the film is equally pleasing to adults and children, “functioning as it does as both serious commentary and pure fantasy.”

This paper attempts a reading of *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* in terms of power politics through the lens of the manipulation of written codes and inscriptions in the film. Identities and cultures are constructed through inscriptions and writings. Writing has often been a marker of social, cultural and economic status. Writing itself is an inscription on empty space (Jain 2012, 5). Writing may also seem to be a struggle for recognition. But it has a tendency to become politicised. Writing becomes the power behind the word and its inadequacies for our times. Writing is a much more complex phenomenon because it has infiltrated ideas of progress, evolution, modernity and development. Writing develops linkages with other communities through culture but at the same time it institutionalizes social fragmentation across classes, everybody can speak, not many can read or write. Writing is also a mode of self representation, of seeking to depict one’s viewpoint as standing firm against the pressure of change. Thus, writing creates a unified field of exchange and communication, gives a new fixity to language making it more powerful. Writing, thus, becomes intertwined with power. Critical theorist Neil Larsen wrote, “The conception of power implies that the wishes of those with more power will normally prevail over the wishes of those with less. Power as simple capacity suggests that there will be an unequal relation between those who employ power for their own purposes and those who are subject to its effects. Power in this sense may be used as an instrument of domination.”

Ray’s films reflect the influence of Indian cinema, the 1950s/60s international arthouse boom, the artistic milieu of Calcutta, and many other international influences and fascinations (Robinson 2004), not to mention his own supreme creative genius. Ray’s artistic psyche is in itself a magical combination of images, words and music. Actually the scriptwriter in Ray had his roots in the painter artist Satyajit Ray. Painting inspired him to go to the moving visual media of filmmaking. (Sen 2012, 152). Ray artworks, sketchbooks, drawing books and
the now famous *Kheror Khatas* or red notebooks. (Sen 2012, 10) offer a treasure trove of his genius.

Ray’s genius lay beyond mere filmmaking. To art-lovers all over the world, the book covers he designed, the type-faces he created, the posters and hoardings of his film, the illustrations he created for his stories Professor Shonku, Feluda the ace detective or others, or his layouts for advertisements are all a feast for the eyes, a visual treat. His strokes speak far beyond the reach of spoken words in their mastery, both in terms of imagery and the way he uses light and shade (Sen 2012, 15). Design in Bengal today bears his legacy in a way that cannot be missed (Sen 1998). Ray was a very informed director as far as illustrations (he used to illustrate his books and films), music and fine arts are concerned. It seems natural to examine how Ray has treated inscriptions and written codes in his films. Since writing represents language through the inscription of signs and symbols, therefore, methods of inscription may be said to broadly fall under writing systems or written code. The deliberate manipulation of the written code even when employed as a comic device by the manipulator generally is seen to result in some discomfiture, if not outright harm to the character or demeanour of some hapless person who is at the receiving end. The paper examines ten such manipulative instances which occur in the film, in detail where power politics comes to the fore.

**The shadow of the stick used as an inscription**

“Amar ei joshtir chaya, jotokhon na oi prastar khand ke sparsha koriche, totokhun sokal” (as long as the shadow of this staff in my hand does not touch the stone you see lying here, it is morning)

Thus, a village elder, respected for his knowledge and wisdom and considered an authoritative figure by the community, does not hesitate to take recourse to the manipulation of a simple scientific truth through the medium of the symbolic-written code, first by claiming that as long as the shadow of his staff does not touch a chance stone, it remains ‘morning’. Second, as soon as it dawns on the group of village elders that Goopy’s singing skills are far from being pleasant, in fact it is truly horrendous, they want to stop their eardrums from further assault. The particular elder with the staff therefore, cunningly manoeuvres it in a way that the shadow inches towards and finally touches the specific stone. The village elders now lament that since the shadow of the staff has touched the stone, the ‘morning’ is over. They make pretensions of scientific knowledge and temper and use a symbolic-written code to manipulate a situation according to their purpose and intent.

This exercise may be seen as a description of the power of words as they mould cultures and attitudes. Language has the power to both articulate and camouflage. The village elders pretend as if they are helping Goopy but through language they camouflage their sadistic aim. Through symbolic inscription they try to give a more authentic stamp to their fraud. Power
seeks to impose, yet resists from ‘sameness’ and hence one of its important strategies is discrimination (Bhabha 1994, 112). The village Amloki is revealed as a village strung out tight between its literate and illiterate ends. Goopy even parodies it in “Tumi chasha, ami ustad khasa” in his introductory scene with a farmer which translates to “You the farmer, I the Ustad (Maestro)”. Power is irrevocably connected to knowledge and the manipulation of the inscribed code shows how this knowledge rests in the hands of a few undeserving men.

**Drawing the strategic location of Rajbari**

The second time a village elder takes recourse to a manipulation of the written code is when he draws a map of the location and layout of the Rajbari, or the king’s palace. The so-called wise man gives Goopy to understand that he is privy to the likes and dislikes of the Rajamoshai and is therefore in a position to ensure that Goopy certainly catches the eye (and ear) of Rajamoshai and comes into his good books. He then proceeds to draw a map showing the location of the Rajbari and its boundary wall and strategizes the position which Goopy would need to settle himself in to be best audible to the Rajamoshai. To further ensure that the poor yokel gets into maximum trouble with the king, he advises Goopy that he should start exhibiting his singing talents at the crack of dawn as the king was a very early riser. But here it needs to be borne in mind that the whole exercise is a manipulative game as the village elders are well aware that Goopy is a very poor singer with miserable singing skills and the Rajamoshai wouldn’t be any too pleased to be rudely awakened from his morning sleep as he was a habitual late riser. Thus, Rajamoshai is seen to be in the midst of a deep slumber when Goopy starts his full throated out of tune yodeling, sitting at a location strategically pinpointed through drawing (symbolic writing) by the village elder.

Rajamoshai, jolted out of his slumber by the cacophony that is Goopy’s singing, is infuriated and asks his sentries to haul into his bedchamber whosoever was responsible for the racket so that he could be humiliated and punished for breaking the early morning peace quiet and interrupting his sleep. It would not be out of place to mention here that the elder employs the symbolic written code to explain the strategic location to Goopy not to ensure that a poor village boy finds favour with the king and is able to make something out of his life, but to ensure with rather sadistic aforethought the misery and humiliation that this action would certainly bring upon Goopy. Language is a means by which the imaginary is invested with reality, the image authenticated as truth (Ganguly 2011, 95); it becomes a conceptual space for the redefinition of self and identity. One of the village elders this time draws out the Rajbari and its periphery for Goopy to make his ill-advice seem honest, to appear as a well-wisher. Thus the inscribed code is quite open to manipulative wiles it may be said.

**The Game of Dice**

The elders of the village are also seen engaging in a game of dice. The game of dice has always been intertwined with manipulation throughout the history of India. Dice is a
game which is played on a board on which a dice is rolled, and like all other games guided by certain rules and codes. But the game has earned the reputation of being a symbol of manipulation right from the age of *The Mahabharatha*. The genesis of the Pandava-Kaurava war lay in the game of dice where all codes were forsaken and the play was manipulated by the ace player Sakuni to an extent that the Pandavas were compelled to part with everything they possessed, their palace, their wealth and even their young and beautiful wife, not to mention even their very own selves. Thus the game of dice has a written symbolic code in terms of the play-board but is often used as a means of outwitting or tricking others rather than for just passing time or as harmless entertainment. The wily village elders are seen engaging in a game of dice while subtly misleading Goopy to a miserable finale. Their perverted concept of ‘fun’, lies in employing their collective intelligence solely towards bringing further misfortune to Goopy, a simple village boy, already with more than his share of misfortunes and misery in life.

Game playing through the nuances of writing and language and the deceptions that are practised thereof form a part of Ray’s classic *Charulata* too (Ganguly 2011, 57). *Charulata* has repeated allusions to reading and writing, weaving and embroidery, newspapers, journals and novels and men belonging to a culture considerably seduced by Anglicized words (Ganguly 2011, 60). Even in *Aranyer Din Ratri*, Ray portrays how as each character speaks more and more in English before the locals, the more they seem to become like their former colonizers (Ganguly 2011, 96) entering into an exploitative mindset. In *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne*, their littleness takes possession of them. One manipulates the shadow of the stick, one draws the Rajbari perimeter with a sadistic aim and one offers a suggestion that Gopinath Kyne, the grocer’s son should say he is Goopinath Gyne and metes out a Sanskrit verse in support of the same.

**The Donkey Episode**

After the incidence of infuriating the king with the early morning exhibition of his vocal skills in front of the palace, Goopy is exiled from the village on Rajamoshai’s orders. He has a donkey for company on whose back he rides on his way out. The donkey in most cultures is regarded as an animal lacking in intelligence and often metaphorically used to describe people with a similar handicap. Goopy is thus symbolically shown to be as foolish as a donkey. The donkey is also regarded as a beast of burden. Goopy thus is shown to bear the burden of his own stupidity and the brunt of other people’s wiles and manipulation. This situation evokes a culture of deprivation; the illiterate live a life on the margin, both figuratively and metaphorically. Johnson (1987) in his commentary on culture says: Culture is associated with social relations, it involves power structures, and it displays social disparity. He maintains that the way to understand culture is to study it as “a whole, and in situ, located, in their material context” (Johnson 1987, 50). Thus, Goopy, honest but foolish is
thrown out of his own village as he cannot stand up intellectually to the educated minority. He inhabits the fringes of his village.

The Dance of Ghosts

The fifth instance where we find people fighting over a written code is in the famous dance of the ghosts’ scene. It is a sequence most admired in the film; it is a six and a half minute ghost dance. A visual and aural treat, it is a combination of live action, shadow puppets and Indian percussion instruments that create a mesmerizing sequence (Sen 2012, 106). Ray scholar, Andrew Robinson critically analyzes the extraordinary and experimental style of the ghost dance Ray used in Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne in relation to the four caste system. The caste system in India involves the work that individuals do in a society-like – priests, warriors, farmers and laborers considered divided into separate caste in the rank order. Robinson correctly claims, “The six and half minute of the exotic dances of the ghost are definitely the four caste systems we have in India (Robinson 2004, 73). Satyajit Ray effectively used the four castes and at the end of ghost dance, positions the priest in the lowest level and on the top are the farmers or the common people (Banerjee 2009). Reacting to the evolving nature of power, Ray imagined the caste system as upside down (Banerjee 2009). When read in terms of the manipulation of the written code, the scene reveals very interesting insights.

The sun is about to set and Goopy and Bagha find themselves alone in the midst of the bamboo forest at dusk. They had sighted a tiger in the jungle earlier and are understandably scared of predatory animals roaming the forest after dark. Partly out of common sense and largely out of terror they take to song and dance and beating of drums and clapping, hoping the commotion created would keep any wild beasts at bay. This fascinates a group of ghosts who inhabit the bamboo forest and they feel inspired to put in a performance themselves. They exhibit their individual and group dance forms according to their religious beliefs and categories. There is an assortment of these dancing ghosts. Some are thin, while some are crooked. Some are drunk and some, a medley of priest ghosts who are unusually obese irrespective of the religion to which they belong. Their attire complete with accompanying accoutrements conforms to their religious ethnicity. One of these fat ghosts tries to convince and impose upon the others the values and doctrines as given in his possibly sacred book. The other ghosts don’t take kindly to this and a fracas ensues. After some time the ghosts fade away as silently as they had appeared but not before the king of the ghosts have blessed Goopy and Bagha with three boons of their choice. Thus here, a written code of religion which should stand for peace, harmony, unity and love ends up becoming the primary source of disharmony and discord. The fat ghosts fight each other till the very end in an attempt to superimpose their written religious doctrines over those of the others. We thus find another instance of the manipulation of the written code in the film.
The written text in the ghost dance thus, becomes a parallel activity that re-mints both the worlds of –here and now as well, as that of there and then. Conflicts over the written have a firm root in the past and they will play a role in the present. Even as ghosts, as part of history they repeat the mistakes; the written code creates more disharmony than harmony, a re-iteration of today’s times. There are several ghosts contesting for space and there are several spaces contesting for meaning as cultural contexts are uncovered in the larger scenario.

The Scroll of Borfi

Borfi, the Court Magician and conjuror of the kingdom of Halla, symbolizes the healer, the greater brain, the intellectual, in the film. Similarly in Hirak Rajar Deshe we have the character of a scientist, Gabeshak Gobochandra, who metes out Mogoj Dholai or brain-washing to people whose views and opinions do not conform to those of the Raja of Hirak. However, in the purview of this paper, we will concentrate only on Borfi alone. Borfi the magician aids the minister of Halla in the furtherance of his evil machinations. Borfi is a competent magician capable of performing magical feats all by himself as he has demonstrated on numerous occasions. He is seen to materialise chairs and seats out of thin air. When the minister taunts him that Goopy and Bagha seem to be no less talented than him, he becomes enraged and conjures up visages with various threatening apparitions. Even when the soldiers of Halla remain lethargic and inactive and quite unresponsive to the orders given by their general or Senapati, Borfi when requested, galvanizes them to action with just a wave of his magic wand. However, Borfi is seen referring to a written scroll when he is asked to prepare a concoction which would enable the people of Shundi to regain their faculty of speech which they had lost earlier because of a spell cast by an evil magician. This however is far from an act of kindness or benevolence on the part of the minister.

The minister of Halla has a sinister purpose in mind. His devious and perverted thinking becomes clearly evident from his expressed comment that his aim is to capture the kingdom of Shundi. However if the people of Shundi are dumb and cannot speak about what they want or desire, how could the minister be able to deny them the same? Borfi, who is otherwise quite spontaneous in his response whenever there is a direct request or comment, is seen to take recourse to the written code of the scroll when the matter of return of the faculty of speech of the people of Shundi is concerned. Thus the written code of the scroll offers written instructions on curing ailments. But this is planned to be used in a most manipulative fashion. The written code, thus, becomes intertwined with manipulation once again. Through the written code, a historical link in time and space is forged anew. Reading Nietzsche’s The Use and Abuse of History (1873), Paul de Man argues that history essentially depends on modernity for its survival, whereas modernity’s existence, ironically, makes itself present by being “reintegrated into a regressive historical process” (151). Borfi refers to a manual of magic to find out a cure, the history of healing seeps into contemporary scenario of healing.
but it has a manipulative dimension to it. Along with healing, the subversive element of corruption, dominance and power also seep into the cure.

**The Messenger from Halla**

The next time the written symbolic code is found to be used as a manipulative instrument is when the messenger from Halla comes to deliver the sealed scroll from the King of Halla to his own brother, the king of Shundi. Here we have one brother writing to his sibling after more than a decade and the written scroll does not only contain any good tidings but conveys a blatant intention and threat of the declaration of war on the kingdom of Shundi.

The psychological as well the physical distance between the brothers is frightening. Apparently, writing in a way brings to life a brotherly bonding lost somewhere in time. As Erik Erikson (1968) has said, “personal identity is an individual’s subjective sense of a continuous existence and a coherent memory.” The written text teases the memory of the King of Shundi and brings out the personal side of the King. Later we find the same effect being achieved by the song of Goopy and Bagha who tease the memory of the King of Halla. The king of Shundi may not be in touch with his brother but a written message regarding declaration of war from his brother makes him lose consciousness in court. That is because of an unexpected turn. He may not be in touch but he knows (and later confides in Goopy and Bagha) that the King of Halla is innocent as a child and would never resort to such an act. Here the written medium also solders the past with the present; relationships, their meaning and their opposition to the pull of contemporariness. This reiterates the view that words are loaded with power. Not only are they a means of communication but they govern and shape our responses. Thus, their origins, directions of movement and the manner of use become increasingly significant in determining human relationships (Jain 2012, 39). Just as the political space enters the personal dimension, the personal life too enters a political space, and writing, in the case of the two brothers, acts as a catalyst.

However, on careful examination, it is revealed that there is more to the message than meets the eye. The surprised and hurt King of Shundi cannot mask his feelings and confesses to Goopy and Bagha that the King of Halla is his own brother with whom he has not been in touch for more than a decade and today, after all these years when contact is made, it is only to declare war on Shundi. Here, the written scroll, instead of being a medium of bonding between two Kings and brothers becomes a medium of alienation between them. Further, the audience comes to know that the King of Halla is regularly kept on a dose of medical and magic potions by his devious minister so that he never becomes aware of his true persona and remains a puppet to the evil machinations of his minister. This also implies that the written code can be easily manipulated and is therefore not so trustworthy as a source as is often expected of it. The written medium once again becomes an exercise in manipulation. Oral literature and messages often take multiple entities within their fold without necessarily
concretising them. They are concerned with movement, not with fixity (Jain 2012) whereas writing provides concretisation and fixity. Either the evil minister has forged the signature-seal of the King of Halla or he has superimposed the signature from some previous scroll. The seal or signature offers an authentication of some document of writing. In both cases it reflects that writing may also erase the original. So, even in the hands of the socio-cultural elite, writing proves to be not a very trustworthy medium.

Writing, or the misuse of it, in this case, enables the audience to consider the nature of reality as provisional. H.G. Wells famously commented that writing has the ability to “put agreement, laws, and commandments on record. It made the growth of states larger than the old city states possible. It made a continuous historical consciousness possible. The command of the priest or king and his seal could go far beyond his sight and voice and could survive his death (Wells 1922, 41). Earlier in the episode with the village elders, the use of language is linked to their sense of empowerment because they have mastered it; but who is empowered in the case of the written text? If writing gives a seal of authenticity to a message, it has now become the casualty of its own creation.

Halla’s King—The King with the Paper Dove

Amidst all the preparation for war going around in the kingdom of Halla, the king of Halla, (when he is not in his drug-induced condition) is seen to carry out the activity of using a knife to carve out designs on paper; he carves out a dove. This one activity alone demonstrates his alienation both from the paper (writing) and from the knife (symbolic of war, violence). The missive demanding war which was purportedly sent out by him in the form of a scroll was very alien to his real nature. He neither uses a paper for writing nor does he use a knife for hurting others. He is alienated from war and from the pretensions of intellectuality. In his natural state, the King of Halla uses the knife on paper (unlike in his violent drug-induced state) to carve out designs. He uses the paper as a decorative item, for creating a white winged dove, a symbol of peace. This use of paper and knife to come out with a novel creative object shows the true nature of the King of Halla.

Shundi’s Counsel and the Message of Surrender

Because the subjects of Shundi are bereft of the ability to speak, they express themselves using sign language and physical gestures. Goopy and Bagha have gone on an adventure to get the King of Halla and to pre-empt the war. At this point of time, one of his wise counsels hands out a written message to him asking the King if he would surrender. The ministers, other members of his court, and even the common people of Shundi so far have been seen to resort to gestures to convey information. The wise counsel however asks in writing if the King would consider surrender, to which the King replies that he has not let go of hope yet as he expects Goopy and Bagha to return with good tidings soon. This is another case where the written code is used by a loyal subject not to provide counsel and hope to the
King but to ask him if he would surrender. The medium of writing, this time is resorted to, to convey a negative counsel. Just as Halla’s minister has lost his representative role and has become a centre for personal gain, fraud and corruption (and has resorted to writing as manipulation), Shundi’s minister has become too frightened and subservient and resorts to writing with the counsel of surrender while there is still time.

The Butterfly Image—The Alpana for marriage

With help from the boons conferred on them by Bhooter Raja, Goopy and Bagha are successfully able to prevent the war. Then comes a time when they will be rewarded. They approach the King of Shundi whose courtroom has a huge butterfly alpana (Alpana or alpona refers to colourful motifs, sacred art or painting done on a floor during auspicious occasions in India, mostly in Bengal and other Eastern states). It might appear that the traditional motif of Indian marriages—the butterfly is also used as an instrument of manipulation in the film. While Bagha has always nurtured a desire to marry a princess or Rajkumari, the King of Shundi chooses Goopy over Bagha to give his daughter’s hand in marriage simply because Goopy is of a shorter stature and his daughter is rather tall in comparison. The issue of marriage creates a rift between the two friends which however gets sorted out when the King of Halla offers the hand of his daughter in marriage to Goopy. All this takes place when the principal players are standing over the traditional Indian symbolic-written code of matrimony, the butterfly motif. It is in the last scene only that the butterfly motif (alpana) which is a standard and acknowledged feature of Indian marriages comes across as the one symbolic-written code which stands for what it has forever stood for—unity, happiness and prosperity. We trust this direction.

Conclusion

The act of writing, owing to the permanence it craves, may be said to be in continuous interaction with the temporal flow of time. It continues to stimulate questions and open up
avenues for discussion. Writing people, events and relationships into existence is a way of negotiating with the illusory, allowing it to take the place of the real when its existence is in doubt (Ganguly 2011, 75). But writing falters. In *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* we do not find a delving within (unlike in films like *Charulata*), a voyage into the interior that writing is supremely capable of inducing because writing, in the hands of the wrong people, becomes more of a social game, a political strategy. Beard (1994) observed that films are among the most common artifacts of modern popular culture that generate and reflect diverse cultures and the traditional values of a society. Ray is known for films that portray the conflicts and contradictions endemic in modern Indian culture and society (Chakrabarti 2011, 147). Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen observes: “In Ray’s films and in his writings, we find explorations of at least three general themes on cultures and their interrelations: the importance of distinctions between different local cultures and their respective individualities; the necessity of understanding the heterogeneous character of each local culture (even the culture of a common, not to mention a region or a country); and the great need for intercultural communication, attended by a recognition of the barriers that make intercultural communication a hard task” (Sen 1996, 32). Writing is perhaps the best way to create a bond between different cultures. Writing or inscription is considered a dependable method of recording and presenting communicative transactions in a permanent form. (Robinson 2003, 36); however, one needs to be extremely careful as the communicative negotiation implied through writing may create disasters if it falls in the wrong hands.
References


