

Satyajit Ray's "The Sahara Mystery": a Case Study of Human-Monster-God Transition

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Abstract: Satyajit Ray's short story "The Sahara Mystery" defies any rigid generic classification since it has elements of "science fantasy," "Gothic," and "detective fiction." The story ponders on the ambivalence of physical abilities gained through science, but the mythic/fantasy-like origin and/or nature of this science complicates the issues of inheritance and consequence of access to those abilities. The 'ability' in this story is pivoted on achieving divine might (through extension of physical dimension); and then moves to question whether the attainment of divinity implies the loss of humanity. Since height and bodily strength distinguish the divine from the human, does not the divine also resemble the monstrous in strength, if not in appearance? The article shall refer to ancient Egyptian, and Indian mythologies, and Indian culture to address this Human-Monster-God connection, using Ray's story as a focal point.

Keywords: divinity, humanity, monstrosity, science, mythology

The title of Satyajit Ray's Bengali short story, "The Sahara Mystery" (Ray 1–23) with the inclusion of the word "Mystery" promises "*unheimlich*," a concept that Sigmund Freud in his essay "The Uncanny" discusses at length: the apprehensions of the discovery of an unknown fact/entity (217–256). Ray's short story is a specimen of generic fusion of both "fantasy" and "Gothic supernaturalism" and "detective" suspense and inquiry. In Ray's short story, a "Greek biologist," Hektor Demetrius, shifts to the unoccupied regions of the Sahara Desert to test upon himself, the "drug" that he produced following the instructions from a "tablet" discovered by him in a Cretan shrine: in consequences his height gains "gigantic" magnitude (Ray 1–23). The possibility of enhanced physical dimensions seems to be both the *threat* and the *promise* of the ability of the "drug," thus Ray's text considers the assessment of *divinity* in opposition to the human and human-like measurement and abilities, influencing the reader to ponder if "god" and "monster" could be interpreted as manifestations and/or personifications of *corporeal* abilities, and if they could be perceived as different versions of the *more-than-human* register (Ray 1–23). Demetrius's death - whether due to the side effect of the "drug," or cardiac failure from a shock amidst natural calamity, or just an unidentified cause - remains unclear, except that the hour of his death follows "exactly" the prediction of a "gypsy woman" (Ray 6, 15–16, 20–23). The text thus remains a midway between "science fiction" and "science fantasy," with fusion of the "Gothic" and the "detective fiction" (in its gradual discovery of Demetrius's secret experiment, the empirical investigation leading to the discovery of it and the "uncanny" spine chilling sight of the exposed monstrous corpse in the nocturnal Sahara [Ray 11–23]).

The story addresses the "postcolonial"/"post-colonial" "counter-discourse" the "colonized" and/or the "Orient" poses to the "colonizer" and/or the "Occident" - Eastern Shonku's conveyance of data regarding Indian "Ayurvedic medicine" elicits Western Demetrius's praise and initiates an epistolary acquaintance (Ray 1). David Hardiman refers to Deepak Chopra who appreciates "Ayurveda" as the accumulation of the ancient Indian profound "knowledge" that pre-dated the

Egyptian Pyramid-projects; the timings of the initiation of “Ayurvedic” studies and application are thus estimated to be in the Third Millennium B.C. (Hardiman 263). The textual coincidence should be noted in Ray’s short story: the “temple” (“[i]n Knossos”) in which Demetrius gathered the “stone inscription” (the “formula” for manufacturing the “drug”) was also “five-thousand-year-old” (Ray 19). Thus in application of the insight of Hardiman’s essay (263) in the discussion of Ray’s text (19), the Third Millennium B.C. is regarded as a prosperous age, shared across contemporary cultures: an age of promising advancement in medicinal field yielding wondrous results (Hardiman 263; Ray 19). Demetrius discovers the means to generate the “drug” that seems later to have been a *gift-turned-poison*; yet that “experiment” is interpreted as a “true” *scientific mission*, to discover the scope of the “drug,” thereby providing a biochemical (hence empirical) explanation of the state of *godliness as a hyper-change in physiological state* (Ray 1–23). This “formula” does not cure disease, so we cannot call it a “medicine”; rather the weaker mortal body is provided with “god’s power” by it (Ray 19).

Shonku’s reverence for Demetrius is validated from the fact that “ancient medicine” is the field in which “research” is being pursued by the latter (Demetrius) (Ray 1, 3, 19). Their interaction is significant because Ayurveda constitutes the *traditional* procedure of treatment linked with ingredients which seem to be “mysterious” because these cannot always be conveniently identified in western medicine, and may not always provide *chemical* accounts of the percentage of their ingredients as these are not always catalogued as *prescriptions* in the form of chemical *formulae*. A medicine sample, like a tablet or a capsule is usually accompanied with the detailed roster showing the percentages of chemical ingredients that constituted it, which are *reported* or else the tablets exist as a *semi-threat*, since we cannot distinguish between its destructive and healing potential. However, the reporting requires the *communication* in English (at least, for a multilingual nation like India), in carefully structured formulae, thereby rendering it comprehensible. Ray however, does not envision intrinsic difference between a *scientist* and an *archaeologist* as the former’s traits are also followed in the pursuance of empirical knowledge in case of ancient structures/sites (1, 3, 19). The borderline between a *patron* of relics and an *interpreter* of the same is also hinted – where the objects are not *translated* but *displaced* (removed from their points of origin for studies) – and thus there is the condition of the spaces of archaeological sites *yielding to the inquirer*, as if the seeker-scientist were worthy of discovering the treasured objects (Ray 3, 19).

Shonku’s initial interpretation of the sounds as originating from the drums having enormous magnitude “of a pyramid” indicates that the pyramid is projected as a unit of measurement (Ray 11). The logic of distinguishing between the natural and the artificial is instrumented through calculated *music* that projects the presence of the human agency (Ray 11–12). It can be observed that in this story Ray draws a distinction between *association-based-ambience* and *association-based-empiricism*. For example, Ray draws the comparison between the height of Khufu’s pyramid and the “sand-hill” (Demetrius’s nose) and the comparison implies: (i) the discovery of a structure that *tends to be ancient Egyptian yet goes beyond the expectations regarding ancient Egyptian engineering*, thereby unsettling the *conventional identifications* of ancient Egyptian Pyramids (Ray 14–17). It is spatially located in Sahara, maybe in a remote Egyptian site (Ray 16), yet it seems not to have been included within the empirical “Egyptological” knowledge acquired by “the civilized world” (Ray 14–17) indicating that an ancient “civilization” with its heritage is accessible conveniently through the “cultural capital” and “empirical quotient” of another succeeding *civilized culture*.

Rather than the source of the “drug” (constituted as a “formula”) in the Cretan site (Ray 19), the “spaces” of the Sahara, and *empirical associations* in “Egyptological” archaeology get focused for the “Mystery” regarding Demetrius’s disappearance and the discovery of his corpse (Ray 1–23).

Shonku infers that the location of the pyramid-resembling "structure," later identified as Demetrius's nose (Ray 14, 16–17, 21–22), is beyond the extent of ancient Egyptian territory/essence, and also quite difficult to be identified with a regular ancient "Egyptian" pyramid (Ray 14–17). Thus the story defines the conditions set in "Egyptological" discipline as well. In this context we may cite Kathryn A. Bard's observation that the discipline of "Egyptology" depends on "systemic study" which gradually evolved since the eighteenth century (5, 3–21). Thus Ray provides a *fictional* example which *appears to be ancient Egyptian*, yet differs from it; he also helps us perceive how fictional imagination can be distinguished from the scope of the empirical sciences (14–17).

Ray's characterization of Demetrius as both showing interest in Cretan "temple"-*"inscription[s]"* and travelling to Egypt and the Sahara seem to echo the reverential interest classical Greece and her thinkers had had for ancient Egypt (Ray 1–23). Herodotus, as Stephen S. Mehler notes, was first to interpret the "Great Pyramid" located in Giza as a funerary monument, which still remains the standardized "Egyptological" "concept" (24–25). Demetrius, as a "true" archaeologist, was able to realize the immense scientific potential of the "formula" for generating the "drug": we have to note and assume that it was *recorded but was not applied*, as far as the textual suggestions are concerned (Ray 19, 22). Hence the *priest-scientists* who supposedly recorded it had been the *proto-scientists* to whom Demetrius is linked in an intellectual succession. Collecting pieces from archaeological sites, expected to be under national protection, might be *legally perceived as theft* but the story does not address that, rather accounts the steadfastness of Demetrius's *suicide mission* to know capabilities of the "drug" (Ray 19–22).

The analogy between the body and the architecture of the pyramids, and the promise of the spiritual rejuvenation to become one with the deities through the mortuary agencies fascinated the Old Kingdom's Egyptians. We learn that Demetrius suffers under the shifting sands, causes tremors terrifying Summerville and Shonku (Ray 15–16, 20–23), and one can trace echoes of Egyptian funerary spells/texts in this context. In Miriam Lichtheim's collection/"*compilation*" of translated Egyptian texts, "Utterance" number "373" from the "Antechamber" of the "West Wall" of Teti's Pyramid celebrates the rejuvenation of the deceased pharaoh, whose limbs as well as bones are reassembled and his strength is invoked, that would separate his flesh from the earth as well as cause the earth to tremble (41–42). Lichtheim's collection thus notes that the Pharaoh makes his presence felt through tectonic movement and is expected to be received by his father Geb in the celestial realm (41–42) who is also the deity of the earth (Hart 72). Alan F. Alford informs us that the "[C]reation" was represented through the "true pyramid" and the analogy between the rising of the Demiurge from the Nun to initiate the "creation of the Universe," and erecting the pyramid was drawn in Egyptian worldview (264). The "[r]isen" pharaoh, as Alford notes, was identified with the Divinity of "[C]reation" (264–267). Thus Alford's research can be referenced here, in correspondence to Ray's appropriation of a (modified) pyramid-like "structure" (Demetrius's nose) (Ray 14, 16–17, 21–22), as a primitive "laboratory" (in which as Shonku speculates, the presence of "alien" agents engaged in scientific pursuits along with Demetrius is assumed [Ray 17, 21–22]), and the body as an agent of cosmic fertilization, which also sums up the role of a "god" in *heightened magnitude* (as the king is uplifted, and becomes a divinity [Lichtheim 41–42; Alford 264–267]), and as Demetrius expands, becoming *divine* (Ray 1–23). Shonku does in fact think of the "mound[']s"/pyramid's huge openings on its "vertical northern" side (Demetrius's nostrils) as entrances to a "subterranean" "laboratory" in which Demetrius might be conducting his experiments (Ray 18, 21–22). As Alford accounts, a series of proclamations refer to the conjoining of the earthquake and the storm, resulting in the king's upward rising and the separation of his body from the earth: "Utterance[s]" "508," "509," and "511" state that terrestrial shakings occur and the celestial thunders clap, as the spirit of the king experiences upliftment in the celestial register (267). "Demetrius's heartbeat" is terminated

following the quake of thunder “exactly at midnight” proving the female gypsy’s estimation correct (Ray 6, 10, 20–23) and one can infer, *thinking like an ancient Egyptian*, that his spirit reaches up to the heavens amidst the tempest and tremors (Alford 267). Thus ancient Egyptian connections with Demetrius can be traced in mythological terms: (i) his posture evokes Geb’s repose (Hart 72), and (ii) the natural “mound” identified with the Pyramid-resembling “mound” (seen by Shonku and Summerville) (Ray 14–19, 21–23) can be linked with the “primeval mound” (Aldred 187) and the Pyramid as the meeting sector of the earth and the heavens (Alford 264–267).

Dominik Wujastyk observes that the event of primordial materialisation is pursued through the separation of the physical portions of the body of Man - considered as “sacrificial being” according to *Puruṣasūkta* from the *Ṛg [Rig] Veda* (192). The transition to the abode of the deities, as Wujastyk notes, follows the observance of “sacrificial” act, as the instructions in the “*svargakāmo yajeta*” indoctrinated in the Vedas imply (194). In this light, Demetrius does sacrifice his *self* through *self-experimentation* in the Sahara (his body is not dissected, but nevertheless goes through sacrifice) (Ray 6, 19, 20–23). According to the *Bhagavad Gītā* section of *The Mahābhārata*, colossal is “*viśvarūpa*” with whom the entire cosmos is assimilated; “*viśvarūpa*” is also considered “*Virāt*,” that is the One Who has Immense Magnitude (Wujastyk 195; Vyāsa 361–365); indeed Demetrius becomes someone like “Colossus” through “his experiment” (Ray 22).

The realization of the divine nature is perpetuated through expansion of the physical form in measurement, sometimes from the *lower-than-average-human* to *higher-than-life-human*, as seen in Vishnu’s “incarnation” as “*Vamana*,” the “Dwarf” who reclaimed the skies as well as the terrestrial abodes through “two paces” which made King Bali identify Him as Vishnu’s form (Ions 49, 52). This realization of Vishnu’s godhead, through His colossal form transformed from the “dwarf” drives home two powerful messages: (i) *concrete (physical) measurement determines extent of abilities*, and (ii) *because Vishnu presented Himself as a Dwarf*; the estimation of *divine* strength is thus conceived in terms of physical dimensions (Ions 49, 52). Hanuman’s “powers” in *The Ramayana* were mentioned by Jambavan, and one feat exhibited by the former was to extend in height, take a leap for flying towards Lanka (Vālmīki 1383–1397; Aravamudan 367–370). While Ghaṭotkaca in *The Mahābhārata* is fatally injured with the “Spear” (provided by Indra) aimed by Karna, the former heightened his corporeal extent so that he could pulverize a significant “section” of the “Kaurava army” under his dead weight (Vyāsa 468–469; Pattanaik 263–264). In all these cases, exaggeration in dimension counts for enormity of abilities and one can trace that echo in Indian-Bengali writer Ray’s perception of *divine* “power” available to an enhanced human through the “drug” as accounted in the story (Ray 19, 21–23).

The story has a problematic ending: the text does not clearly indicate what happens to Demetrius’s corpse after Shonku and Summerville witness it in its entirety (Ray 22–23). Speculations will continue amidst Ray-scholars if Demetrius expired because his human body was unable to cope with the rapidly gained *divine* “power” thanks to the “drug” (Ray 19, 22–23). Since the story textually does not reveal if the “stone inscription” discovered by Demetrius were later lost or destroyed, we can, having appreciated Demetrius’s success, *accept* that nobody would be able to repeat his success (subtly expressed through Summerville’s “sigh,” though it could also imply mourning the death of a gifted *fellow-scientist*); hence the erasure of the memories associated with Demetrius, along with both the product and signs of his experiment (the consequent *success* of the *medicine* / “drug,” and the remaining corpse) should be required in the story’s closure (Ray 19, 22–23). Instead of these details, we see the application of Shonku’s destructive weapon on the “hundreds of vultures” descending from the sky upon the Sahara to feast on Demetrius’s “gigantic” corpse (the story lacks this very important hint if Demetrius’s corpse were removed as well by this weapon) (Ray 22–23). The

objective reader is left pondering with this unsettling closure: while Summerville and Shonku establish Demetrius as the "true scientist" who went ahead to *reduce his self/himself to a test-subject/object, yet simultaneously to enhance his body to "Colossus,"* Shonku's (rather impulsive) aesthetic response controls the closure, when he removes the vultures – an obvious misbalance being created consequently in the "food chain" due to the reduction of a substantial count in the species, and such a rather immediate action cannot be considered an appropriate *decision/response* from another "true scientist" (Shonku), and certainly not from a *dutiful civilian*, since animal-hunting and/or cruelty to animals are subjected to legal actions (Ray 22–23). As Indian readers, we should read this story with dispassionate interest, as Indian religions teach non-violence and because (certain) animals are considered sacred in both Hinduism and Buddhism, but simultaneously should also consider the potential of an Indian mind to seek truth and wisdom, which does come with sacrifices.

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