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**ROBERTSON'S RUBY: IS IT ONLY A "POPULAR FICTION"?**

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**Abstract:** The relationship between colonizers and natives is the story of an age old antagonism which is still present in post-colonial period. This tension can be found in many literary texts even in detective story, like Satyajit Ray's *Robertson's Ruby* (1992). The story is not just a simple detective story rather the story is about the ideological struggle during colonial and post-colonial period. Here, Ray, juxtaposes the colonial and post-colonial India to portray the complex relationship between colonizers and colonized. To develop the plot, Ray introduces two very important historical events of Indian sub-continent in this story. One is Indian Rebellion of 1857 or the Sepoy Mutiny and another is Indigo plantation. The story shows how history of subjugation repeats itself in different context, in different times. In this story Ray explores the attitude of the colonizers towards the natives. He also presents how this continuous suppression results in ultimate revenge by one native. Frantz Fanon's idea of "socio-diagnostic psychiatry" explains the natives' resistance against the colonial ideology. The paper tries to find out how Ray weaves a narrative of anticolonial resistance into popular detective story.

**Keywords:** detective story, post-colonial, socio-diagnostic psychiatry.

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**Introduction:** The relationship between colonizers and natives is the story of an age old antagonism which is still present in post-colonial period. This tension can be found in many literary texts even in detective story, like Satyajit Ray's *Robertson's Ruby* (1992). Ray was a prominent Bengali film director as well as writer who is the creator of two most memorable fictional characters of Bengali literature, Prodosh Chandra Mitra or Feluda, the private detective and Professor Shanku, the Bengali scientist. Though Ray mainly wrote for teenagers, his writings were very popular among all age group readers. *Robertson's Ruby* was first published in *Sharadia Desh*, 1992. *Robertson's Ruby* is an adventure of Feluda. The story is not just a simple detective story rather the story has several layers. Here, Ray, juxtaposes the colonial and post-colonial India to portray the complex relationship between colonizers and colonized. Frantz Fanon's idea of "socio-diagnostic psychiatry" explains the natives' resistance against the colonial ideology. The paper tries to find out how Ray weaves a narrative anticolonial resistance into popular detective story by using two important historical incidents.

In *Black Skin, White Mask* (1986) Frantz Fanon explains black peoples' psychology through a framework known as "socio-diagnostic psychiatry". Fanon's framework is based on social and economic context. Colonized people are both socially and economically suppressed by the colonizers. Thus, the natives always want to be like the colonizers to enjoy social and economic freedom and this desire makes them to think alike the colonizers. Fanon's socio-diagnostic psychiatry shows how continuous suppression creates the suppressed unforgiving. In this story two important historical incidents lead the plot and show two key characteristics of colonial beliefs and these are greed and pride. These two

human flaws are the primary fuel for the colonizers which influence them to overtake the political power from the natives by any mean. Taking someone's independence both physically and psychologically tends to resistance from the controlled after certain period and the colonized person may answer to the colonizers like the same way as the colonizers did. Here, "self versus other" dichotomy repeats again and again. This story is full of this dichotomy.

To develop the plot, Ray introduces two very important historical events of Indian sub-continent in this story and these are -Indian Rebellion of 1857 or the Sepoy Mutiny and Indigo plantation. A ruby was taken from the Palace of Lucknow after Indian Rebellion by an English soldier named Patrick Robertson who fought against the native soldiers. He left India with the ruby and it became the Robertson's family gem. Patrick's descendent Peter found his forefather journal and decides to give the ruby back to India to fulfill Patrick's last wish. The story takes place after the 45 years of Indian independence when Peter comes to India with his friend Tom Maxwell. Tom's ancestor Resinald Maxwell also lived in the colonial India and he owned an indigo plantation. Both Peter and Tom represent two types of western beliefs. Peter has sympathy for India like Patrick, on contrary Tom has colonial attitude like Resinald. Tom's thinking leads to an ultimate burst out from a native who lost his forefather for Resinald's cruelty.

In this story, the Ruby plays a vital role but the main theme of this story is not the missing Ruby, rather historical incidents and the colonial attitude give this detective story a new angle. The story is all about ancestors and decedents. The story is also all about struggle between colonizing beliefs. Mystery, avenge, friendship, struggle, family legacy all of the factors make this detective story very interesting. This story also gives a glimpse of an important chapter of the

history of India in colonized period. Ray's mastery is that he represents some important issues in such a way that does not lose the taste of detective story.

This ruby is a symbol of greed. The ruby was taken in the colonial time from India. After the 45 years of independence when Peter wants to give the ruby back to its own place, Tom's colonial attitude comes out. He tries to manipulate Peter to sell the ruby. This greed is the main factor which can change a person's mind just like as Kurtz of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899).

India got her independence from the British in 1947, but after 45 years of independence, most of the Westerners retain the colonial attitude. They think the independence of India is not working, rather the British rules would have been better.

In an interview, Ray talks about the Eastern and Western cultural differences:

Of course, our cultural background, our cultural makeup, is a fusion of East and West. This applies to anybody who has been educated in the city in India and who has been exposed to the classics of English literature. After all, our knowledge of the West is deeper than the Westerner's knowledge of our country. We have imbibed Western education. Western music, Western art, Western literature have all been very influential in India. (An Interview with Satyajit Ray, P. 24)

This statement of Ray clearly introduced in *Robertson's Ruby*. In the story when some local vagabonds attack Tom for taking pictures of a dead body which is in middle of the process of cremation, Feluda tries to convince them. Here he says –

Please forgive him for the last time. He is new here and has no idea about our rituals. He made a huge mistake by taking picture of the departed. I will talk to him and will make sure he understands. Please let him go this time. (p.38)

This statement shows that the cultural idea of East is very limited to the West. Through this story the writer brilliantly introduce the conflict between West and East.

*Robertson's Ruby* can be a classic example of post-colonial thought of westerners. Greed is the main factor that takes control over the humanity. Ambition of becoming wealthy makes human beings barbaric. Greed and cruelty were the two main features of colonial period and through this story, Ray successfully draws those aspects. Less knowledge on culture also makes people to compare with their own culture and when they find differences, they consider those differences absurd and awkward. As the westerners do not have adequate knowledge on the East, Eastern culture becomes unknown to them and makes them to think superior. The conversation between Chowbe and Tom clearly explains this situation.

**Tom said:** I never blindly follow you. I'll believe in my own conscience. I have seen in two days that your country is still in backwards. You haven't progressed even a little bit in 45 years. You use old methods of cultivation, people pulls rickshaw in Kolkata and I have seen families sleeping in sidewalks. Are these the sign of our 'progressed civilization'? You try to hide these from whole world. I can't approve it. I will show them the real condition of independent India by clicking pictures. (p.41)

**Chowbe denied:** You can't judge us based on these points Mr. Maxwell. What about our other achievements? We have sent satellite in the space. You have definitely noticed our Self-made day to day products? Cloths, medicines, cosmetics, electronic devices–We produce almost everything here in India! Are you going to focus only on our failures? Is your own country perfect? (p.41)

**Tom replied:** Don't compare them. Independent India is nothing but a joke. I want to prove it with my camera. You need the exact same colonial power, our ancestors had over you fifty years ago. Otherwise this country will never be developed. My great great grandfather was right. (p.41)

Then he proudly mention his ancestor –Resinald Maxwell's cruelty who was an owner of an indigo plantation. He said, "...He kicked one of his servants to death" (p.41). In colonial period, the peasants of Bengal were forced to cultivate indigo. The indigo plantations were controlled by the British colonizers and they forced the natives to cultivate indigo instead of paddy or other crops. The natives were helpless for many reasons and the colonizers took cruelty as a weapon to control the natives and made them cultivate indigo. Many references and literary text are available for this types of cruelty for example *Nil Durpan* or *Indigo Mirror* (1858-1859) of Dinabandhu Mitra. The "Indigo revolt of 1860" was the resistance against indigo plantation.

The servant who was killed by Resinald was a native pankhapuler. Pankah is the native word of large fan, it was usually fixed to the ceiling. That pankah or fan was operated or pulled by a servant called pukawallah. That native's descendent inspector Chowbe takes a small revenge of this unpunished crime by hitting on Tom's head and making him unconscious. However, Feluda knows that Chowbe did the crime, he in a sense supports the descendent because of Indian nationalism and the crime which been committed by Resinald. **Feluda says:** You will never face any punishment. I would do the same if my situation was like you I would've done the same if I was you! You gave light punishment for an unforgiving crime. You are innocent.

This incident was not very irregular in colonial period rather this type of inhumanity was quite regular because the natives did not have any power to ask for

justice. Thus, most of the time the colonizers did not face any inquiry for their crime. Chowbe's action has two purposes –one is for taking revenge and another is for social status. Chowbe hides the ruby and then he also reveals it to show that the Indian police is not for fun as Tom deliberately compare East with West. Chowbe wants to show their old rulers that independent India has the same status as like as England has.

The reactions of natives is as like as Fanon's thought where the outburst is the product of colonial

treatment and the natives show the "others" that they are superior as like as the colonizers. This dichotomy may not end, and the historical incidents may repeat at any time in any context.

To conclude it can be said that though it is a detective story, this story can be used as a literary text to teach post-colonial literature where the students get an overall idea on colonial attitude. This text reflects the writer's resistance on western's thought.

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