

Time Tells Tales: Reading Time in Ray's Wonderland - 'The Unicorn Expedition'**Shaoni Dasgupta**, Assistant Professor, Amity University

Abstract: "Fantasy is silver and scarlet, indigo and azure, obsidian veined with gold and lapis lazuli. Reality is plywood and plastic, done up in med brown and olive drab", says George R.R. Martin. Taking a cue from one of the most influential writers of fantasy fiction of this age, my paper will harp on one of the common traits in fantasy fiction-the alternate world. In this paper, I aim to bring together two eminent writers of Fantasy Literature, Satyajit Ray and Lewis Carol, and to unite certain sub-motifs enveloped within the motif of an alternate world. In tracing our journeys to the parallel world of fantasy, we shall talk about Bergsonian theory of Time and Carol's usage of the same in his illustrations of Alice's adventures. This will further our theory to that of the science-fiction of Satyajit Ray, 'The Unicorn Expedition' where the protagonist, Professor Shonku and his adventures take us in a whirlwind of a timeless journey.

Keywords: Time, Journey, Bergson, Imagination, Fantasy

There is a place like no place on Earth. A land full of wonder, mystery and danger! Some say to survive it: You need to be as mad as a hatter.(Burton). The genre of Fantasy Literature engages in the happenings of a faraway world which runs parallel to this world but involves sorcery, witchcraft, magic and mythical creatures, which often interact with humans. The above quote from Tim Burton's adaptation *Alice in Wonderland* (2010), aptly sums up the faraway parallel universe in all its enchantment. This fantasy world constitutes of everything that is beyond reality and the plots unravel in this faraway land that has been often compared to the Garden of Eden as it upholds an Utopian image of the world. Utopia, coined by Sir Thomas More in 1516, literally means 'no place' in Greek and is used for describing a non-existent society. These worlds are often characterized by enchanted journeys from the world of reality to that of fantasy. In such fantastic journeys, Time remains an important tenet characterizing the genre of Fantasy Literature where one emerges younger and livelier on their way back from the 'wonderland'(s). One might presume the fundamental reason for this to be the innermost desire of every human being to slow time down and procrastinate Death by any means, whatsoever. It is in this Utopian worlds this wish comes true and the loopholes allowed in the fundamental fabric of the genre of Fantasy Literature, helps the authors to toy with Time. If Hogwarts Express carries the wizards and witches from platform 9 ¾ to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Alice has a great fall down a rabbit-hole in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*(1865) and steps through a looking glass that transfers her to the world beyond it in its sequel , *Through the Looking Glass* (1871). Serving as a fuel to our imagination, these alternate fantasy worlds often meet our deepest desires while reflecting the ridiculousness of our world of reality. Satyajit Ray, like Rowling, Carroll, Tolkien and others create these fantasy world(s) for Professor Shonku and his alliances to continue their adventures.

Ray's creation of this brilliant inventor, Trilokeshwar Shonku, admittedly based on Conan Doyle's Professor Challenger and Sukumar Ray's 'Hesoram Hushiar', is a professor of physics in Calcutta's Scottish Church College. He, along with his neighbour Avinash Babu (Majumdar), his cat Newton, his household-help Prahllad, and his English and German fellow scholars and friends, Saunders and Kroll respectively, has reigned Bengali Science Fiction for decades. Professor Shonku, with the help of his various inventions, embark on a series of mystical journeys, some of which might be at the periphery or even outside the realm of reality. 'The Unicorn Expedition' delineates Professor Shonku and his fellow enthusiasts' quest in which they hope to encounter the flying Lama and a herd of Unicorns, somewhere near Tibet, as recorded in Charles Willard's diary, that has been retrieved after his death. As they encounter numerous hurdles, they learn the secret of the flying Lamas, which lie in the boots lined with 'ngmung' powder with the help of which one's weight is reduced to "such an extent that a breath of wind can make him soar 'like a feather plucked from the back of a swan'(Ray224), and reach Dung-lung-do – Ray's Utopian enclosure. Here, they encounter fantastic and mythical beasts and come back younger than before. One might wonder at the treatment of Time in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and its sequel *Through the Looking Glass* in both its general treatment of the plot as well as carving the character of the Hatter (or, Hatta, as in *Through the Looking Glass*). Calvin R. Petersen, in his essay, "Time and Stress: Alice in Wonderland", points out how K.C. Cole was of opinion that Carroll conceived of Alice as a "clock pendulum in her encounter with the opposing forces of gravity during her back-and-forth fall through the bottomless rabbit hole". Cole believes, as Petersen writes in the above essay, that that "loss of a comprehensible space-time frame of reference is also the first thing she encounters". Admittedly mad, Carroll portrays the character of Hatter, with utmost intensity as he makes the Hatter explain to Alice how he and the March Hare are trapped in a tea party where it is 6:00 p.m. forever. The Hatter goes on to explain how, when he had tried to sing for the Queen of Hearts, she had sentenced him for "murdering time". Even though, he had escaped the punishment, Time, furious at his attempted "murder", has frozen himself for the Hatter keeping him stuck at the 6:00 p.m. tea party forever.

The phrase “as mad as a hatter” refers to the 19thC usage of mercury-based compounds in the making of hats which in turn affected the mental health of the hatters by exposing them to mercury-poisoning, resulting in tremendous mood-swings, making them appear “mad” to the rest of the world. Johnny Depp, who plays the Hatter in the Tim Burton adaptation of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, *Alice in Wonderland*(2010), made sure that the director changes the colour of his eyes and hair throughout the film to indicate the emotions of the Hatter that remain close to the surface and the impending threat to insanity that he exuberates. In the mad tea party, Alice encounters the circular motion in which the creatures change places making it possible only for Hatter to use a clean cup everytime as the other creatures simply follow him. One might notice how Carroll deftly paints the freezing of Time in the circular motion in which the party moves, the repeatability of the ritual and the sheer inability to find a start or an end point to the “mad” tea party. Through Hatter’s nonsensical poetry and unanswerable riddles, Carroll clearly throws light upon the futility of sense, law and order. The Hatter’s “If you knew Time as well as I do, ..you wouldn’t talk about wasting it. It’s him” (Carroll 60), is the quintessential statement that changes our outlook on usage of time in this novel and its sequel. Alice is amazed at the Hatter’s pocket watch which “tells the day of the month and doesn’t tell what o’clock it is!”(Carroll 59) Hatter’s explanation to this outsider to Wonderland makes her remain perplexed as ever at the bizzare workings of this world. When Alice goes back through the looking glass, she encounters a backward flow of time where, one needs to run at a particular speed to be able to stay at one place and twice as much speed to move from one place to another. This Utopian world allows one to react to a wound even before it has been inflicted and a punishment to be given even before one can be proved guilty-all hinting at the backward flow of Time where cause and effect have an inverted relationship. Petersen, in his essay, remarks how Bergson might have been amused at the Queen’s remark that she remembered things from the following week and Petersen believes, Bergson is vindicated by the sheer ridiculousness of cutting a cake in Looking-Glass-world where it needs to be handed out to be able to cut into pieces. Nietzsche, as Peterson mentions in his essay, had suggested how it is always the ironist who signals the “glow of a sun about to set” and Peterson goes on to conclude how the white rabbit might, after all sense the same and thus, get late because “irony is late—representing the last stage of decay in the mythical conception of time, forcing humanity, as Carl Jung put it, to “exchange the life-preserving rhythm of the aeons for the dread ticking of the clock””.

As Marjorie Taylor, in her essay “The Role of Creative Control and Culture in Children’s Fantasy/Reality Judgements”, mentions how the experience of fantasy varies with the amount of control exercised by children and that they are not the “originators” of myths and fantasies and are rather fed the delusional attributes of the genre and hence one can often wonder at the usage of Time as simply an extension to such delusions. One can be reminded of Henri Bergson’s theory of clock time and psychological time in this context where clock time refers to the outer, chronological time and psychological time or ‘duree’(duration) refers to the active time spent living or in active consciousness and it was Bergson’s firm belief that reality was characterized by the different experiences of time which makes one believe that reality exists only in subjective apprehension of time. Mary Ann Gillies, in the chapter “Bergsonism: Time out of Mind”, from *A Concise Companion to Modernism*, states that,

In Bergsonian construction of reality, though real living goes on in the indivisible realm of duree, this world is broken into segments in order to explain, analyze and even understand the nature of experience. The conscious reconstruction of our experiences distorts them, but this distortion is inevitable because of the impossibility of ever halting the flow of duree and because of the equally inevitable human need to violate this flow in order to assert our will over the natural environment.

As Alvin C. Kibel puts in the essay, ‘Logic and Satire in “Alice in Wonderland”’, that the Hatter’s riddle about the raven and the writing desk might have no answer but one learns that “Time has been keeping things at six o’clock in the revenge for abuses, so that the creatures are perpetually at tea. In the same essay, Kibel states that the Hatter’s boast – “that he knows time-is outwardly correct” but his acquaintance gradually proves to be “servile and petitioning”.

In the essay, ‘Time thinking: Bergson’s Double Philosophy of Mind’, Frederic Worms states how Bergson’s goal was not only to mention the contradiction between thought and time and that it went beyond that and bifurcated itself- thinking time with mind as well as thinking mind as temporal time as a paradoxical object for thought. This further complicates the relationship between time and thought as used in Fantasy Literature- time being a part of the thought process- the weaving of the fantasy world harping on Bergson’s thinking of time with mind. Time is clearly thought of as a mystery or an enigmatic contradiction and as Worms puts in the above mentioned essay, the ultimate power is attributed to one’s thought. Frederic Worms mentions how Bergson’s philosophy is, instead of being a philosophy of time, is a philosophy of mind and that of the relationship between time and mind and in this essay, makes clear how “one has to think mind to be able to think time”. In the stories of Professor Shonku, the artist in Ray merges with the scientific consciousness of Shonku thereby creating a text that is both a seminal text in the genre of science-fiction and well as fantasy

literature. Speaking of Science fiction, one might be interested in bringing 'Professor Shonku and the Time-Machine', where, Ray deals with Time, as he plants himself and other users of the machine as outsiders to the events of past and future- being transported to a space and time which is very different from the present. By stopping an attempted murder and by recognizing the culprit of a previous murder, Shonku beats Time, quite contrary to the Madhatter's belief that Time won't "stand beating"(Carroll 60). Shonku's "Have you realized that we are going back younger by about twenty years?"(Ray 236) definitely takes Avinash Babu by surprise but Ray successfully harps on the necessary trait in the Fantasy genre conforming to the ideas projected by other Fantasy authors across the globe and authenticated by Bergson's theory of 'Time and Free Will' which expands on the theory of psychological and clock time. Other than time affecting the age of the characters involved, it is generally said to heal diseased body parts as in Ray's 'The Unicorn Expedition' where Saunders, other than looking younger than before, gains strength in his weak tooth.

While discussing Time, one might take up the discourse of diary writing used as a tool of recording events by Satyajit Ray. He makes his protagonist keep a journal, very different from the diary Feluda, Ray's sleuth-hero, where he notes down important information and dates pertaining to one particular case that he is presently investigating. Professor Shonku is a regular writer of his diary and it is through his records that we come to know of his adventures. In this story, one might notice a disparity in the chronology of keeping the journal where 15th August is followed by 11th August. Other than this, Shonku and his fellow-mates, experience the land of Dung-lung-do in less than a day because he comes back to keeping his journal and continues even after his experience and on the same day. However, since they come back twenty years younger, one might say that time had flown backwards only to grant them their, like every other human's, fundamental wish –that to stop aging or slow down the process,at least. Roger W. Holmes in his essay, 'The Philosopher's "Alice in Wonderland"', mentions how Carroll uses "the absurd hilarity of Wonderland to bring technical concepts into sharp focus". He goes on to criticize the reversible time of *Through the Looking Glass* as "strange only because misunderstood".

The element of unfamiliarity in the literature of fantasy genre is evidently present in the Shonku-stories by Ray where he, along with his acquaintances, discover various undiscovered territories like 'Swapnodweep'- the unknown and undiscovered island that Shonku dreams of and eventually reaches and Dung-lung-do, the Utopian enclosure near Tibet-which he comes to know of from Charles Willard's diary and later visits with his associates. Ray blurs the obvious mythical contradictions of the Orient and the Occident in 'The Unicorn Expedition' as he brings forth mythical creatures from all over the world- the "Roc, or Rukh" from Sinbad's tale, the "Simurgh of Persian legends", the Arabian Anka, the Russian Nork, "the Feng and the Kirne of the Japanese". Other than this, they encountered the mythical bird, Phoenix, the serpent Basilisk, which can reduce anything to ashes with its "unblinking stare" and the four-tusked elephant which could be Airavaat, the mount of the Hindu king of Gods, Indradev. When Professor Shonku, mentions the encounter with the Kirne from Japan, the condition that the Fantastic world is entirely dependent on one's ability to believe, is enhanced as the Kirne, as legend has it, can be encountered only if one has a pure-hearted faith in its existence-hence rendered worthy. This can be further supported by the exchange between Alice and the Hatter in the 2010 movie adaptation where Alice, at the prospect of killing the Jaberwocky, exclaims "This is impossible" only to hear the response fundamental to Fantasy Literature- "Only if you believe it is", from the Hatter. This can be further exemplified by lifting this extract from the translation of 'Eksringo Obhijan' into 'The Unicorn Expedition' by the author himself, where Shonku tries to analyze the mysterious workings of the newly-discovered mystic world and the creatures inhabiting the enclosure,

My feeling is that if a great many people believe in an imaginary creature over a great length of time, the sheer force of that belief may bring to life that creature with all the characteristics human imagination has endowed it with. Dung-lung-do was a repository of such imaginary creatures. Perhaps it was the only place of its kind on earth. To try to bring anything from Dung-lung-do into the world of reality was futile, which is why the unicorn-cub vanished as soon as Markham crossed the limits of the world of fantasy. (236)

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