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Decolonising the narrative in folkloric adaptations of *The King of Ireland's Son* and "Goopi Gyne Bagha Byne"

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Abstract

Examining constructions of Indigenous childhoods in folkloric adaptations of Padraic Colum's *The King of Ireland's Son* (1916) and Upendrakishore Ray Chaudhury's "Goopi Gyne Bagha Byne" (1914), this article offers an anti-colonial reading of popular Anglo-Irish and Bangla folk literature. These adaptations, particularly marketed as children's and young adult literature, engaged with several themes such as religious fanaticism, jingoism, capitalism, nationalism, famine, etc. Considering personal influences, literary inspirations, ideological dispositions, narrative styles, and thematic choices made by Colum and Ray Chaudhury in their adaptations, this article studies the similar use of narrative techniques by these authors to reclaim their cultural and ethnic superiority.

Keywords: folklore; postcoloniality; indigenous narratives; children's literature; India and Ireland

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Introduction: Understanding the ideological position of Colum and Chaudhury

The present article seeks to explore Padraic Colum and Upendraishore Ray Choudhury's attempts at contemporising and modernising traditional folk narratives for a juvenile audience. The emergence of early nationalist ideology in Ireland as well as in India – particularly in Bengal – can be attributed to several comparable periods in history that have had a parallel influence on the national literature of both countries. Continents apart, there are yet some common events, like inequality in land ownership based on socio-religious divides and economic enslavement and impoverishment of agrarian communities, that were impactful in the formation of the colonial identity of the Indian and Irish people. Additionally, a spate of religious separatism and growing resistance to the centralisation of power by the British government in these dependencies paved the way for the development of local patriotisms that "constituted memories and traditions of earlier patriotisms of the days of Tone or the Maratha realm […] the mystical ideas of race and nation, revived folklorism and reactive mainline religion: the Faith of our Fathers or *sanatan dharma* [ancient religion]" (Bayly, 2000, p. 395). At the core of Colum and Choudhury's literary ideology lies a "modernised version of rationalist, political, and economic critique of British government which stretched back to the days of Tom Paine and Edmund Burke" (Bayly, 2000, p. 395).

An interest in antiquity and paganism became a philosophic reinforcement of emergent nationalism in both India and Ireland. The process of decolonisation in these dependencies was underwritten through the reclaiming of a pre-colonial past and a return to indigenous languages and literature. Administrative efficiency in the colonies of Bengal and Ireland necessitated the acceptance of both native and English languages for instructional and official use by the administrators. Out of this necessity arose a shared interest on the part of both the ruler and the ruled in promoting vernacular languages and literature in these countries. The advent of the printing press facilitated the dissemination of vernacular literature in Bengal (Ghosh, 2002). In Ireland, religious societies lent their support to the indigenous press (O Ciosain, 1997). The educated middle-class Irish intelligentsia, in liaison with the Protestant elite in Ireland, and the Bengali elite/*bhadralok*, supported by the ruling class in

Bengal, contributed to the emergence of vernacular print culture in these nations. The reading public was divided between the consumers of the high-brow literature of the *bhadralok* and those who read the commercial, popular, colloquial, and folk literature of the common people. Although the Bengali elite had considerable control over the reading tastes of the public, Anindita Ghosh states, "Print did not mirror the aspirations of the dominant classes only" (2002, p. 4330) but other groups (lower orders, working-class people) also left their mark on print culture. Juvenile print literature in Ireland and Bengal initially flourished under the patronship of the educated elites but also reflected working-class sentiments in the writing of authors such as W.B. Yeats and Colum. Irish and Indian concepts of cultural revivalism are based on the belief that it is linguistics that shapes our cognition. Language plays a decisive role in the constitution of the racial, national, and religious identity of colonial people. Whereas some authors like Chaudhury chose to write in the vernacular to articulate the experience of the colonial subject, Colum captured the "rhythm and tone of [Irish] speech" (Bowen, 1973, p. 71) in his English fiction. Folklorism and traditionalism, essentially demotic in essence (Goswami, 2012) offered these writers the opportunity to materialise "a systematic theory of meaning", examining "radical interpretations" and addressing "truth-theories" (Gaskin, 2021) that emphasise the importance of historical context and authorial intention in the production of fictional literary works. In this article, Colum and Chaudhury's re-imagining of traditional folklore and popular culture is understood in the light of the authors' material realities and how they not only interpret but also critique those realities.

Colum spent his childhood in a workhouse, a government institution that provided accommodation to displaced and homeless people, most of whom were Catholics. His social circumstances greatly impacted his literary imagination, storytelling, and characterisations that were mostly about working-class Catholics reeling under imperial rule, penury, and hunger (Bowen, 1970). His political and ideological position is indicated by his association with the celebrated artists and nationalists, W.B. Yeats, George Russell, and J.M. Synge, and his participation in the Theosophical Society, where he discussed Indian philosophy and Mahatma Gandhi. His drama, poetry, and short fiction held a mirror to colonial Ireland, focusing on issues of class struggle, land ownership, cultural revival, and political independence. However, the debate around Ireland's postcoloniality has

always been a rather contested topic, "yet its inclusion is vital because of that very contestation" (Flannery, 2007, p. 5) Noteworthily, Francis Charles McGrath approaches this contestation in view of Homi K. Bhabha's theoretical take on postcolonial cultures with relation to the rewriting of grand narratives of western cultures and reclaiming of lost histories of people. Therefore, "the complexity of the Irish situation especially mandates an analysis that is neither limited to simplified Irish/British binaries nor confined to conventional deployments of race, class, gender" (McGrath, 1999, p. 6) because it is "located geographically and racially within the first world" (McGrath, 1999, p. 6) unlike other colonies of the British Empire. To situate Ireland within the postcolonial discourse, then, it is pertinent to refer to Bhabha's views on how colonial identity is formed through the exclusion of "dissident histories and voices [of] women, minority groups, bearer of policed sexualities […] narratives of cultural and political diaspora, the major social displacements of peasant and aboriginal communities, the poetics of exile" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 6-7). In light of this, it can be said that in the 'othering' of the Catholics (who became 'minority groups', either dwindling away in workhouses or embracing the fate of exiles) one can identify the development of a postcolonial identity of the Irish people. Additionally, understanding the position of Ireland in the context of Bhabha's "colonial mimicry" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 89), it can be said that Ireland's postcolonial status lies in mirroring Britain's imperial power and linguistic constructions but not becoming British enough in their allegiance to their indigenous culture and language. In being just enough but not quite British, although being the only colonial subject sharing such geopolitical proximity with the colonising country, Ireland claims its positionality. The postcolonial nature of Ireland lies in these ambiguities and complexities that have come to define Irish national identity. Therefore, it can be assumed that Ireland's postcoloniality can be attributed to its history of cultural colonisation through the marginalisation of the Irish language and culture and discrimination against Catholics.

Chaudhury's background, however, was more prosperous. He was born in 1863 into affluence in the village of Moshua in the Mymensingh district of Bengal; the scion of a landlord or *zamindar*, he was adopted and raised by his uncle, Horikishore. A childhood spent in a rural environment, surrounded by nature and within an agrarian community pulsating with the luminous tradition of oral storytelling, not only influenced him as a

person but also shaped his artistic and literary imagination. Chaudhury's creative genius flourished at Presidency College in Calcutta, where he befriended some of the iconic figures of the Bengali cultural renaissance, such as Raja Rammohan Roy and members of the Tagore family as well as other artists, activists, and political leaders. Around this time, the spirit of the *Swadeshi* movement (formed in Calcutta in 1905), akin to Irish 'home-production' (Bayly, 2000, p. 379), had also percolated into the artistic and literary fields. He found literary inspiration in ancient Hindu mythology and folklore, leading him to extol "the virtues of ancient Hindu texts and customs as being superior to Western (British) ones" (Goswami, 2012, p. 143). Although he was an affiliate of the *bhadralok* intelligentsia in Calcutta, Chaudhury's fiction resisted elitism. Steeped in colloquialisms and abrogation, his literary work catered to a broad spectrum of readership. As anti-colonial sentiments in the country began to escalate, members of the Bengali intelligentsia found themselves increasingly disillusioned with the British administration. Supriya Goswami counts Chaudhury among these members of "the disaffected *bhadralok* class" (Goswami, 2022, p. 143).

Analysis of two of Colum and Chaudhury's folkloric adaptations in this article allows one to assess the construction of childhood within narratives where the protagonists contend with their colonial identities. In their writings, both Colum and Chaudhury adapted mythology and indigenous texts to accommodate the experiences of the disenfranchised. At the turn of the 20th century in Ireland and India, amidst civil unrest, a growing surge of nationalism and a desire for territorial freedom from oppressive British rule, they identified a heterodox approach to the ethos of juvenile literature – one that was at odds with the hyper-nationalistic sentiments prevalent at the time.

Modifying the Anglocentric metanarrative

Subversion of the Anglocentric metanarrative is remarkably nuanced in the works of both Colum and Chaudhury. As they were both re-tellers of traditional stories for the young, it is important to understand their methods, both individually and in comparison. Before delving into the way their works subvert or modify the metanarrative, a working definition of this term is necessary. My definition is taken from the work of John Stephen and Robyn McCallum on the use of traditional stories in children's

literature: "A metanarrative is a global or totalising cultural narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience" (Stephen and McCallum, 1998, p. 7). They argue that the re-telling of traditional stories for young readers takes place within this metanarrative because such a framework "offers a patterned and shapely narrative structure, expresses significant and universal human experiences, interlinks 'truth' and cultural heritage, and rests moral judgment within an ethical dimension" (p. 7). They identify this framework as embodying a 'Western metaethic', owing to its origins to Europe-based or associated cultures denoted by the blanket term 'Western'. Due to its cultural specificity, they also identify certain limitations of this metaethic:

> [T]here are some domains of retold story we have deliberately excluded from our discussions because the metaethics will always be imposed from outside. […] One such domain is narratives that appropriate the beliefs and stories of indigenous peoples within the post-colonial societies. (Stephen and McCallum, 1998, p. 7)

In the works of Colum and Chaudhury, we see an attempt at overcoming this limitation by rewriting or modifying the Anglocentric metanarrative/ Western metaethic with postcolonial significations. This article argues that this modification is facilitated through the contemporisation of the folk-type in their fiction. The writers retain several elements of the metaethic because even in postcolonial discourses it is difficult to divorce dominant cultural influences from indigenous literature and culture. But they modified the narrative methods, introduced culture-specific tropes and argot, and made copious use of humour, irony, satire, symbolism, and political allegory to substantially alter the Western metaethic. They sought not an alternative to the metaethic but a way of accommodating divergent cultural and literary discourses within it.

Contemporising the folk-type

There are several ways in which Colum contemporises the traditional folk-form that characterises his juvenile fiction. These techniques reveal affinities founded in his own childhood: love for the vagrant life and a fascination with oral performative storytelling (Colum, 1973, p. 64–65). The first-person authoritative narration found in traditional folklore of European origin is substituted with a combination of third-person and

first-person narrative techniques, mimicking the performative oral storytelling method in Colum's works. The storyteller often breaks out of third-person narration to directly address the audience. The structured uniformity of traditional folkloric narration is, as a result, replaced by polyvocality. Traditional European folk heroes fall under several categories viz. the conquering hero, the delivering and avenging hero, the benefactor, the martyr, etc. (Klapp, 1948, p. 136) but the nomadic hero associated with king-heroes who ensure the fertility of the land and beast (Ó Cathasaigh, 1978, p. 74) is quite characteristic of the Irish folk hero and is a widely exploited theme in Colum's adaptations. Connal from his novel *King of Ireland's Son* (1916) "did nothing but ride and hunt all day" (Colum, 1916, p. 2). The playfulness of his character and his love for the outdoors are emphasised and yet he lives up to all the challenges that life throws at him. This trope is particularly important because the Irish folkloric theme of a Waste Land in need of a fecundating hero agent (Ó Cathasaigh, 1978, p. 74) is used by Colum to explore concepts such as English practice of 'backyardism', resource exploitation, and food scarcity that ravaged the country during English occupation.

In the novel, Connal requests cattle from the old man he defeats in the game of cards. For a prince, cattle are an unconventional request. He makes a pragmatic demand. The author develops the character of the prince in the image of a peasant or a farmer, emphasising his ordinariness and establishing a connection with the working classes. He is stripped of his aristocracy and made to behave and appear as a commoner. We can find similar characterisations in the works of Ella Young in adaptations such as *Celtic Wonder Tales* (1910) where mythical or princely protagonists resemble ordinary Irish people in their speech, actions, and mannerisms. Similarly, Bangla fairy tale tradition is also marked by its populism as opposed to the elitism of fairy tales from Western literary cultures. For instance, the king and queen in "Ruptarashi" (1913), a fairy tale by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, sit on the floor of their palace to play a game of dice while they try to catch a mouse that has been bothering them for a while. Their roles as king and queen seem quite titular, and they bear resemblance to the common man and not to people of a royal lineage. Again, with respect to Irish history and cultural tradition, cattle are of great significance. As Tim Pat Coogan describes in *The Famine Plot: England's Role in Ireland's Greatest Tragedy*, English attitude of 'backyardism' reduced Ireland to:

> a poverty-stricken land to which famine was a frequent visitor. […] Famine *struck* Ireland in the seventeenth century and even before that. (Coogan, 2012, p. 14)

England's "scorched earth policy that wiped both cattle and humans from much of the Irish landscape" (Coogan, 2012, p. 14) added to the people's misery. In light of Ireland's history of colonial exploitation and starvation, the prince's demand for cattle assumes great significance. Karen Hill McNamara also records that "as the Irish grew hungrier, they would seek out cows and bleed them, using the blood rich in iron and protein, for nourishment" (McNamara, 2009, p. 153). Cattle or cows, therefore, in a postcolonial reading of Colum's adaptation from Irish folklore, serve as a metaphor for sustenance and deliverance from hunger. Likewise, Goopi-Bagha in Chaudhury's story, "Goopi Gyne Bagha Byne", do not ask for any specific boon from the king of ghosts they encounter after they are banished from their villages for creating a commotion with their musical adventures, other than basic necessities for survival. It is the king of ghosts who recognises their good-naturedness and adds embellishments to the boons. First, they express their desire to entertain people with their music and performance, signifying an altruistic desire as opposed to commercial aspirations. Second, they wish to be able to eat whenever and whatever they want. The king of ghosts gives them a pouch from which they can conjure the best food and clothes in the world. Third, they entreat him to grant them a boon that will enable them to travel anywhere they want. The boons echo the common man's universal aspirations: the ability to make people happy, something to wear, something to eat, and the freedom to move around at will, rights historically denied in colonial social and political systems to the indigenous subjects. Usually, the hero from folklore, even if destitute, aspires for upward social mobility and unhesitatingly embraces his good fortune in acquiring a kingdom and a princess at the end of his magical quest. But Goopi-Bagha, who represent the subaltern in the text, hesitate to assume the role of the 'ruler'. Their discomfort is evident when they re-enter the king's palace as 'kings' to outwit the king's guards who earlier mistook them for imposters and apprehended them. The sartorial transformation they undergo results in the change of the king's attitude towards them, as they are welcomed with open arms:

> Goopi folded his hands and said, 'Maharaj, we're not kings. We're your servants.' Although Goopi was telling the truth, the king took this as a sign of their humility. He thought, 'They are such gracious and courteous people, like true kings, their modesty is their virtue.'. (Ray Chaudhury, 2014, p. 57)

Goopi's statement is not only a source of jocularity but an unsettling of the 'Western metaethic' because it is at odds with traditional attitudes of the heroes to the acquisition of power. In *Power of Myth*, Joseph Campbell proposes that the hero from the East differs from that of the West based on the "degree of illumination or action" (Sue, 1991, p. 166) seen in the hero. He offers the example of Buddha and his powers of introspection that led to his illuminated state of mind. Although he goes on to equate the figures of Buddha and Christ; Buddha's journey, unlike that of Christ, is predominantly an internal one. The process of individuation in the hero or hero-figures such as Buddha in Eastern cultures mostly follows a phase of self-realisation. Internal stimuli, as opposed to any external orders or forces, are responsible for the hero's character development. Therefore, Goopi's incredulity is a result of self-reflection which is not common in a stereotypical folkloric hero from Western cultures.

It is relevant to mention here that Colum's writings too are influenced by Oriental philosophy and theology. It is quite evident in his fantasy fiction for young adults such as *The Boy Apprenticed to an Enchanter* (1920). It is likely that he was inspired by the works of his mentor, George Russell (AE), who identified the "Irish Celt with the Occident's cultural other as a means of cultural decolonisation and Irish literary production." (Lennon, 2004, p. 166). This is also reflected in Colum's characterisations, which often betray a mixture of Eastern and Western values. Even in *The King of Ireland's Son*, Connal's deeper understanding of his people and their needs is not masked by his playfulness or his vagabond way of life, which is established when he asks for cattle from the enchanter as his reward.

In Colum's adaptation, the old man reveals himself as the evil Enchanter of the Black Backlands, alluding to the Irish theme of Waste Land. About the enchanter, the king's councillor, Maravaun, warns the king "if the heir of your kingdom does not honourably pay his forfeit, the ground of Ireland won't give crops and the cattle won't give milk" (Colum, 2012, p. 20). Thus, the enchanter embodies the image of a usurper. The 'forfeit' must

be paid to continue the supply of food and nourishment, a situation reminiscent of Ireland's economic and financial dependency on England. Colum revisits traditional folklore to embed anti-colonial significations. The metaethical praxis is permeated with postcolonial ideology.

"When the King of the Cats came to King Connal's Dominion" is an allegorical subplot in *The King of Ireland's Son.* The cat-king belongs to migratory legends of type 6070 B and tales of Aarne-Thompson-Uther type 113A (Ashliman, 1996–2022), a popular folk tale type in England, Scotland, and Ireland. Through this story, Colum dexterously paints a picture of Ireland's struggles with colonialism and settler aggression. Political allegory in Colum is characterised by the use of irony and humour. He associates several amusing yet telling characteristics with the 'king of cats' who flaunts his whiskers, unperturbed by the loss of his tail, symptomatic of British vaingloriousness despite growing discontent everywhere. The allusion becomes clearer when the author demarcates countries in and around Europe, Britain, and Ireland as the Cat King's erstwhile dominion, noting that most of them are gone with the exception of Ireland. For 100 years, the king has received tributes from the Irish cats but there is a sudden decline in the inflow, setting him off on a journey to determine the cause. Upon his arrival at the island, he finds it in a state of deprivation and learns of the Eagle-Emperor's torments. The Cat King decides to confront this emperor. Until this point, the king appears as a saviour figure. The delusional Cat King, relying on the support of his Irish subjects, finds himself an advisor in Quick-to-Grab, again this name is tell-tale because it reflects the attitude of colonisers in general, who suggests he must not reveal his true identity to them because that can lead to retaliation. The author here mocks the complacency of the King in his self-assigned role of protector while the people of Ireland perceive him differently. These circumstances are symptomatic of people's distrust of the British Crown and the suspicion aroused in the common people at the sight of British presence on Irish soil. In a conversation between Quick-to-Grab and his masters, their fear of the common man is expressed in no uncertain terms:

> "Not a word will we tell you," said the woman, "until we hear what the King of the Cats is doing in Ireland. Is he bringing wars and rebellions into the country?"

> "Wars and rebellions, —no, ma'am," said Quick-to-Grab, "but deliverance from oppression. Why are the cats of the country lean and lazy and covered with ashes?". (Colum, 2012, p. 99)

The allusion to the discord and intransigence within Irish society is evident here. The British government, represented in the person of the Cat-King, was desperate to salvage its dominion amidst widespread anti-government sentiments among its subjects who were rising in sporadic acts of rebellion. The house cats who supported the king are reminiscent of those who wanted to remain a part of the British empire. Then there were local troublemakers, such as the Eagle-Emperor and his retinue, likely anthropomorphic representations of landlords, who were also exploiting poor Irish tenants. The struggle for power between the King of Cats and the Eagle-Emperor and the stark reality of their roles as rulers/saviours is expressed through a 'food' motif when at the Hill of Horns, the abode of the emperor, the king appears unmoved at the sight of carcasses of subjects who have been killed by the emperor. Instead, a piece of left-over salmon in the ruins grabs his attention. Both, the king and the emperor, are motivated by profit rather than altruistic concerns.

The association of the food motif with mordant anti-war rhetoric is also found in Chaudury's story. The king of Halla appoints Goopi-Bagha as his court musicians. The king of Shundi has declared war against Halla, and Goopi-Bagha offer to help. The Hindu kings often organised prayers or sacrifices before a war. Chaudhury describes a crowded courtyard where people are immersed in a war frenzy, offering frantic prayers for victory. After surveying the situation for a few days, Goopi-Bagha trick the unassuming village folk into believing that a deity was showering blessings on her devotees in the form of sweets falling from the sky, which they had been conjuring magically. The people, hungry and desperate, partake of them in absolute devotion. The king is informed about this wondrous shower of sweets but by the time he reaches the courtyard, people who had gathered there after the prayers have eaten them all. The king is furious. His subjects appease him with the consolation that all the sweets the deity sends the next day will be reserved for the king. To the starving millions there cannot be a more powerful distraction from war than food. The king's attitude towards sweets represents a critique of capitalism and the free market economy of the East India Company. The king's inaction to address the food crisis in his kingdom and confiscation of surplus

supply is symptomatic of the economic exploitation practised during the colonial period in India. It is also a biting commentary on the politics of warmongering to deflect people's attention from the more pressing issues such as high taxation, poverty, and scarcity of food. In a bid to stop the king and dissuade the public into averting the war, they set up this elaborate ploy.

Through the depiction of the starving multitude praying for victory in war, their allegiance to an idol that they assume is sending sweets from heaven and equating the abduction of their king with the blessings of a deity, the tale depicts what might be termed a collective infantile "obsessional neurosis", "disavowal of reality", and *amentia* or "state of blissful hallucinatory confusion" that Sigmund Freud (Strachey, 1961, p. 43) states concerning religious practices. The neurosis and *amentia* so engulf the common folks that they fail to identify their real struggles.

Conclusion

It is interesting how the 'kings' in Chaudhury and Colum's adaptations lack agency. They are rather powerless and redundant in their roles as authoritative figures. The homeless king of cats or the congenial king of ghosts belie typical representations of royalty. Their characters are cast in the mould of the common man, the farmer or the travelling musician. So ultimately the stories about kings and queens of traditional folklore are re-imagined into those of the common man's resistance to social inequality and search for freedom. The lofty aspirations for kingdoms and princesses seen in folklore and fairy tales that take after the conventions of the Western literary canon are replaced by the humanitarian and altruistic objectives of Colum's Connal or Chaudhury's Goopi and Bagha. Again, most anti-colonial literature of the twentieth century was inspired by socialism which has always been critical of the West and Western metaethics. Juvenile literature by Colum and Chaudhury foregrounds the effects of economic dominance and the necessity for epistemic resistance to overturn oppressive normative structures.

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