ABSTRACT

Madness is an all-pervasive element of literature. It has appeared time and again in throughout literary history- as melancholia in the Renaissance period, aggression and rebellion in the Nineteenth Century, paranoia and artistic obsession in Modernist Literature and as existential angst in postmodern literature. This paper is an attempt to study the madness of Sukumar Ray’s character Dasharathi within the framework of Foucault’s History of Madness, applying to it the observations of the relation between society and madness and the interplay between society, madness and its role in literature.

Keywords: Madness in Literature; Sukumar Ray; Foucault’s on Madness

INTRODUCTION

Literature has had many a tryst with madness. Theory has often germinated from the debate on reason and insanity, mad writers have created wastelands and delirious spaces of infinite imagination, madness has been glorified as transcendental bliss; locked up tight in attics, it has beseeched Neptune’s ocean to wash its hands clean, madness has been feigned and madness has even thrown tea parties.

Much has been written about fools (one manifestation of madness), their role in literature and in society. Shakespeare has worked madness of varying kinds in his plays- the desolate Lear, the suffering Hamlet, the guilt-ridden Lady Macbeth and his many fools displaying a different kind of insanity. Of the Shakespearean fool, Asimov wrote that a successful fool is not one at all, whereas Gilbert and Gubar proposed that women were categorized into mad or sane in Nineteenth century literature as a means of assigning roles of rebellion or submission to them; the Bakhtinian concept of carnivalesque carries the notion further to a much more nefarious scale of a society altogether in the feast of fools- a polyphony of voices, whereas nonsense literature often works in one mad-hatter per text, sometimes even more - Carroll’s Hatter who is stuck in time, and marked by his antics is central to her book Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland. In Bengali fiction Rabindranath Tagore’s Shey is replete with bizarre characters and Sukumar Ray’s HaJaBaRaLa takes this literary nonsense further in its characters that include a lecturing goat, a crazy cat and a man who conjures laughable situations. The genre of absurd theatre civilizes the madman turning him into a tramp, as Beckett’s celebrated tramps Vladimir and Estragon await Godot, and become the prototypes of blaring morbid madness in the real world.

In her work Madness in Literature, Lillian Feder observes that the many varieties of madness in literature are parallel to the forms of madness found in human societies. She refers to Antonin Artuad’s claim that madmen are in truth victims of social dictatorship and that their position in society is based upon the opposition between social and political institutions and dominant cultural assumptions.
This paper attempts to study the light-hearted nonsensical madness in Sukumar Ray’s short stories using Foucault’s History of Madness as a frame of reference. Foucault’s work examines the inconstant status of madness and the ever-changing dynamic between madness and society from the end of the Middle Ages through to the Modern period. The lunatic has been treated differently in each age - cast off sometimes on a Ship of Fools to a place unknown; confined and punished as an anti-social being, punished as an animal at others and perceived as one with an illness that must evoke fear and demand a treatment in an asylum or a psychiatric hospital. Madness, according to Foucault dwells in a distinct space within society which determines the nature and position of madness in that society. There is therefore, a history of madness itself, for madness is a “phenomenon of civilisation, as variable, as floating as any other phenomenon of culture”. (Foucault, History of Madness xiv)

The world represented by Sukumar Ray receives and perceives madness not in a way that vilifies or expels it. Ray’s madman is a child named Dasharathi, better known as Pagla Dashu (translated “Crazy Dashu”). Ray creates glowing and evocative vignettes around Dashu and his friends set in a school in Bengal. Children fill up his canvas of stories which are constructed around pranks, learning and morals. Dasharathi sits at the heart of these tales, but he is different from all the other children around him, for Dashu is a madcap:

“There was no one in our school who did not know Pagla or Madcap Dashu. Even those who did not know anyone else were easily able to spot Pagla Dashu. Once the school hired a new durwan who was absolutely fresh from the sticks. But even he had no trouble figuring out who Pagla Dashu was just from the mention of his name. From the way he looked, talked and walked, it was clear that Dashu was slightly touched in the head.” (Ray, The Crazy Tales of Pagla Dashu and Co., 1)

This introductory extract makes it palpable that Dashu is distinguishable from those around him by virtue of his mental makeup. He is different, not only in the way he conducts himself but also different in the way he looks. Besides that his distinctiveness sets him so far apart from the others that even those who knew no one else were easily able to spot Dashu. By and by the nature and form of Dashu’s madness emerges before us.

As one reads story after story one can tell that Dashu has what seems to be an imbalance more than a straight-forward retardation. Another passage reads, “It was not as if he was dim-witted. He was clever at maths, especially in solving long divisions and multiplications. Then again he would devise such ingenious tricks to make fools of us that we could only marvel at his brains… Dashu could not sing to save his life- he had no sense of melody or rhythm and he knew this very well.” (Ray, The Crazy Tales of Pagla Dashu and Co., 2)

Ray builds with much ingenuity a mind of contrasts and of contradictions; genius in some facets and impish folly in others. Dashu is not just a madcap. He is the prankster, the laughing stock, the spectator, the schemer and the performer. In the story titled “Pagla Dashu” he devises an elaborate plan to get back at the children who constantly tease and call him names. He sets up a trap for them and leads them to an enchanting quest that finds its end in a note that reads, “Curiosity killed the cat.” (Ray, The Crazy Tales of Pagla Dashu and Co. 6) Dashu sits by as a spectator laughing at them while they fall prey to his plan. It is as though Ray blesses Dashu with the ability to retaliate, to strike back in his own obscure way at those who “always made fun of him…made unkind comments to his face about his looks and his mental faculties.” (Ray, The Crazy Tales of Pagla Dashu and Co.,3) Dashu does not allow their comments to bring him down though, in fact he revels in the attention, “ he would add colour to our comments and relate bizarre stories about himself.” (Ray, The Crazy Tales of Pagla Dashu and Co., 3)

Dashu’s position in the stories is relevant too. He appears in them not as a peripheral character but takes centre stage and quite literally so in more than one story- in “Dashu’s Crazy Act” he is the amateur thespian who forgets his lines and begins to laugh on stage, spits out paan, squabbles on stages about the number of lines he has and even steps into a scene after his character a dead. In “Pagla
Dashu” he sings at the “top of his voice” (Ray, *The Crazy Tales of Pagla Dashu and Co.*, 4) for the school inspector despite having no sense of rhythm and music.

As it emerges Dashu is clearly not Foucault’s madman from the Renaissance who has “tragic experience of possible worlds which menace the real one…” (Foucault, *History of Madness*, xvi) neither can he perceive forces which threaten the organization of the world and of reality. His madness does not claim to have found the truth between what men are and what they pretend to be.

What then is Dashu’s madness and how is it experienced by those around him? It resembles somewhat the classical experience of madness. Yet, although the Seventeenth and the Eighteenth centuries called for the confinement of madness in locked up spaces, in Dashu’s case there is still surface contact between Dashu who represents unreason and the others who stand for reason. Dashu’s imprisonment or confinement is a covert one; wherein a division or *partage* between reason and madness has clearly taken place, and this division parallels the social division instituted by the house of confinement. As part of the Great Confinement the mad were locked up with the blasphemous and the unemployed, with prostitutes and other deviants, and were considered as having freely chosen the path of mistake, against truth and reason. They were made to reverse this choice by a meticulously described system of physical constraints and rewards.

“For frenzy and ranting madness, there is the fool strapped to the chair under the watchful eye of Minerva; for the sombre melancholics who haunt the countryside like hungry lone wolves there is Jupiter, the master of animal metamorphoses, and then there are the ‘drunkard madmen’, ‘madmen with no memory or understanding’, ‘drowsy or half-dead madmen’ and ‘stale or empty-headed madmen’… A whole world of disorder, where every man has his place, and the Praise of Reason is sung in the manner of Erasmus… embarkation has given way to confinement.” (Foucault, *History of Madness*, 41)

Pagla Dashu’s society confines him in an invisible house of confinement, but does not consider him worthy of punishment or of reformation. His flaw is irreparable and therefore no attempts must be made to improve it. Throughout the stories there is conflict ensuing between Dashu and the society around him. Jagabandhu refuses to help Dashu with English (“Pagla Dashu”), Bishu would rather give Bhaju the gardener a role in the school play than Dashu (“Dashu’s Crazy Act”) and Rampada does not offer Dashu *mihidana* on his birthday (“Chinese Crackers”). Dashu strikes back in his own outlandish way. He hides Jagabandhu’s book, he bribes Gansha for a role in the play and lights up crackers beneath Pandit Moshai, the Sanskrit teacher’s chair to clarify that if Rampada can decide what he’d like to do with his *mihidana* Dashu can decide what he’d like to do with his crackers.

Nonetheless, while the other children are expelled from the classroom and harsh corrective punishment is meted out to bring them to acceptable modes of behaviour Dashu is allowed to stay the way he is. In a story titled “Jatin’s Slippers” a whole fleet of tailors and cobblers teach Jatin not to take things for granted; in “The Glutton” Haripada the glut is straightened out with a lie about arsenic in his laddoos and a bitter tonic to help him get rid of the poison. Dashu’s life is sweet. He can do as he pleases and yet go unpunished. Dashu’s faults are ignored, cornered and overlooked while the other children are punished and rewarded. Dashu makes numerous attempts to be noticed. He wears trousers that resemble pyjamas and a coat that looks like a pillowcase to create a sensation; he shaves his head bald and wears a bandana to evoke ridicule, he deliberately makes a disastrous performance on stage to get even with those children who have long speeches. These are the very children who complain, “If any of us had done that we would certainly be punished, but Dashu got away with it because he was mad” (Ray, *The Crazy Tales of Pagla Dashu and Co.*, 4); the very children who tell us,

“One cannot argue with such a lunatic. So the teachers left for their own classrooms after they had scolded Dashu a little. He faced no punishment since he was ‘mad‘.” (Ray, *The Crazy Tales of Pagla Dashu and Co.*, 57)
One might say therefore that Dashu is the madman who lives in a society that turns him into a fool, an emblem of social behaviour that is improper and ludicrous of the graceless, ugly, deformed and senseless; a society that thrusts him in fool-making situations ever so often just so that it may have a hearty laugh at him.

Foucault laments the transporting of madmen away from society on a ship from which there is no escape, he bemoans the great confinement of fools that penalizes them for their insanity and attempts to test their ethical and economic potential; he expresses much discontent over the birth of an asylum where madness must be treated as a disease.

“Curing the mad is not the only possible reaction to the phenomenon of madness.” (Foucault, History of Madness, xv) and the world that Dashu inhabits is perhaps far more insidious than any of those under Foucault’s consideration for it invites the madman to be a part of it and then propels him to the status of a fool and the role of an anti-hero, a world that mocks and giggles at his madness; a world that celebrates, berates and uses the insanity of another to entertain itself. A world that, might one say silently exploits the madman, a madman who joins in without knowledge of what his own position is in the group. A madman, who in this case is but a child with a learning disability.

OBJECTIVES
To observe the shape-shifting manifestations of madness in literature. To trace the connection between madness in literature and society in Sukumar Ray’s Pagla Dashu stories using Foucault’s History of Madness.

CONCLUSION
Sukumar Ray’s Pagla Dashu stories draw all their humour from a protagonist who is a young child not as able as the rest of his fellows. The world he lives in derives its humour by jeering at his disability. Foucault stresses on the correlation between societies and the way madness is perceived in that society, or the madmen are punished in it. Through a close study of Ray’s stories the critic finds that milieu is perhaps far less forgiving and callous than that of Foucault, for it keeps the madman within its realm to make him the scapegoat.

REFERENCES