

## Locating Textuality in the City through “Literary Nonsense”: Reading Tagore’s *Khapchara* (1937)

**Abu Farah Hoque**  
Assistant Professor  
Maharani Kasiswari College, Kolkata, India  
[itsabuforu@gmail.com](mailto:itsabuforu@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

It is very difficult to pin down the genre of literature named “Nonsense” for discussion and analysis. This paper will show how Tagore’s *Khapchara*, written in 1937, emerges as a ‘nonsense verse collection’ through mingling both the Western and Indian tradition of literary nonsense. This paper will also highlight how *Khapchara* combines nonsensicality and high seriousness. Finally, the paper would tend to locate the enmeshed textuality that can be traced in cities across the globe, especially Calcutta (presently known as Kolkata) through the lyrics written by Tagore.

**Keywords:** Rabindranath Tagore, *Khapchara*, City, Textuality, Literary Nonsense, Kolkata.

Participating in the realm of “literary nonsense”, Tagore critically examines a range of social, political and cultural issues of the Nineteenth century colonial Bengal in his *Khapchara*. He further illustrates the way Calcutta has suffered under the British Raj. It is pertinent to note that most of the lyrics written in *Khapchara* are deeply enmeshed in the politics of representing the city as a subject of colonial oppression and subjugation.

In *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense*, Wim Tigges defines nonsense literature as “a genre of narrative literature which balances a multiplicity of meaning with a simultaneous absence of meaning” (Tigges 47). He further states that “this balance is affected by playing with the rules of language, logic, prosody and representation or a combination of these” (47). It is precisely in this context where I would like to posit *Khapchara*, a collage of hundred disjointed nonsensical lyrics written by Tagore, which acts as his motivational voyage into the realm of nonsense literature.

The Bengali word ‘khapchara’ means ‘incongruity’ or ‘mismatch’. Now, the title *Khapchara* is made up of two metaphorical terms- ‘khap’ and ‘chara’; the word ‘Khap’ is the allegorised representation of the very pre-imposed idea of ‘conventionality / the idea of sense-making’ and ‘chara’ is a keener invitation for ‘openness’ and an immense search for free play. Therefore, the title of Tagore’s verse collection is seen hovering between openness

and rationale and this hovering dominates almost all the lyrics of *Khapchara* to the fullest. Furthermore, it should be noted that *Khapchara* was written at a time which marked the emergence of the urban Bengali middle class 'Babus' in Kolkata.

In his discussion on literary nonsense, Walter Blumenfeld presents four types of nonsense. 'Semantic nonsense', according to Menninghaus, "arises from the disturbance or suspension of the 'relation between the sign and its reference'" (Menninghaus 11). 'Semantic nonsense' predominates most of the lyrics of *Khapchara*. For instance, "Lyric no. 60" not only violates the 'ideal framework', as termed by Husserl in his *Logical Investigations* to define the field of semantic nonsense, but it also disturbs the relationship between sign and its reference:

An eminent Engineer Crafts the plan  
To build a bridge.  
The bridge collapses, as usual,  
And disappears into an unknown land. (Tagore 71).

"Telic nonsense or nonsense of purpose occurs", as Menninghaus opines, "when an intentionally guided behaviour is incompatible with its purpose" (Menninghaus 11). As an ideal 'Telic nonsense', "Lyric No. 97" introduces Khudiram / Khudubabu, "Khudubabu sits in the sun/And sings a song" (Tagore 134). The poem presents a deliberate purposelessness at once. But the poem also illustrates the typical colonial Babus of Kolkata who were full of idleness and lethargy which is Tagore critically questions in his rhymes.

It is the 'Logical nonsense' which is prominent in *Khapchara*. "Logical nonsense occurs between judgements and their grounds, and therefore", as Menninghaus suggests, "does not lie in the statement itself, but only in its justification" (Menninghaus 11). For example, conforming to Blumenfeldian logical nonsense, in "Lyric No 10", for instance, Tinkari eats less in order to balance his 'kinkor-kinkori' in his house: "I really eat very less / To keep myself thin and slim" (Tagore 13). The poem critically depicts the poverty-ridden condition of the city in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Kolkata ironically.

Menninghaus further asserts that "Motivational nonsense is present when the relation between certain behaviour and its psychological conditions "does not correspond to our conscious feelings or to what we think we know about them" (Menninghaus 12). For instance, the very first apologia of *Khapchara* conforms to the typical Blumenfeldian motivational nonsense when Tagore, reacting to the spontaneous urge of an audience to write non serious verses, confesses that it is difficult to write nonsense: "You ask me to write simple words / But it's not easy to write simple words" (Tagore iii).

Gestalt nonsense attains its existence too in *Khapchara*. "In Eidetic or Gestalt nonsense", writes Menninghaus, "It is essentially a matter of the relationship of the parts to the whole. If we have no dominance, no ruling unity, then sense falls away"(Menninghaus

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12). Tagore's *Khapchara*, inspite of being a heap of disjointed diverse odd lyrics, emerges as a unified whole through collage and gives occurrence to, as Blumenfeld says, the 'Gestalt nonsense'. So, Tagore's *Khapchara* amalgamates all types of nonsense as explained in Blumenfeld's typology. Most of the lyrics of the collection, it would be pertinent to note, investigates the city of Kolkata and the tale of its citizens through humour as well as through irony.

Apart from these western traditions of literary nonsense, in the very veins of Tagore's *Khapchara* lies the indigenous Indian tradition of nonsense writing. Sumanyu Satpathy in *Tradition and Modernity in Indian Nonsense* opines that "modern or literary nonsense in India is a hybrid product that arose from colonial contact" (Satpathy et al. 27). He further argues that it is the "Bengali literary culture that responded to the foreign brand of nonsense first" (27). Both Sukumar Ray and Tagore brought to light the connection between the native Indian tradition and its modern counterpart by giving nonsense the phrase 'the rasa of whimsy'.

In Bengal, however, Tagore is one of the first to feel the unavoidable link between traditional 'chhora'(rhyme) and Indian literary nonsense. In 1893, in an essay named "Chele Bhulano chhora", he writes, "Ancient Rigveda was composed as panegyric to Indra, Chandra and Varuna; but chhorahas emerged from the panegyric meant for the twin gods enshrined in the mother's breast- little boys and girls. Neither of these can claim precedence over the other; the chhora may not be historically old but is so intrinsically". (Loka Sahitya)

Now, Tagore's *Khapchara* is not a 'chele bhulano chhora' at all. Combining the English tradition and the indigenous Indian traditions of nonsense, it rather participates in its project to portray the picture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century colonial Bengal and to criticize the society from within. For instance, "Lyric no. 2" introduces Damoder Seth, the typical middle-class Babu who is dissatisfied even with 'ample food': "Damodor Seth is not satisfied with limited food" (Tagore 3) and urges for more. Through Damudor Seth's urge formore 'imported' food, Tagore in this lyric metaphorically presents the newly emergent urban middle class Babu's keener discontent even with adequacy and attacks the ramification of colonialism.

The satirical intention of Tagore takes another direction when in "Lyric no 24" he attacks the institution named marriage: "Father-in-Law cries for his Daughter / The Groom laughs ironically!" (Tagore 29). The tradition of marriage making is clearly satirized as in "Lyric no. 71" Tagore introduces Nobu who succeeds to release his tensions through five marriages (99). These Tagorian verses echo Sukumar Ray's poem named "Sat-Patra" ("A Marriage is Announced") where the name Gangaram is used to poke fun at the institution of arranged marriage. The tradition of dowry is also brought under question in "Lyric no. 48" and "Lyric no. 49":

Tagore through his nonsensical verses ridicules colonial education too. For instance, in “Lyric no.3” he writes: “Matilal Nandy yawns at the school” (Tagore 4). This act of yawning is highly symbolic of a vehement criticism against the colonial education system. Through Bholanath, Tagore radically attacks colonial education system in “Verse no. 63” as he celebrates for “writing more in spite of being mathematically wrong”(Tagore 88). Again, with his apparently nonsensical verses, Tagore directs his satire at the very nationalist agenda of the uncritical valorisation of the cultural past. Proper instance would be “Lyric no. 77”, “That point is not quoted in the notebook.” (Tagore 108)

The demand for historically defined art is a clear contribution of western education. The speaker of “Lyric no. 30” refuses to modernize himself. His attitude to music is purely emotional. So he hardly cares about others and continues singing in the midnight. His approach to music is purely emotional. He is the representative figure of the all-round decadence and larger Indian mindset. Like Vishwmalochan Sharma in Ray’s poem “The Power of Music”, this man is thrown out of the repository of traditional knowledge as he refuses to historicize himself and art. The verse again demonstrates the crisis of the people of Kolkata of that time who were subjugated economically due to British Raj. Tagore in this verse also attacks the idea of blindly following pre-imposed notions.

These attacks are the stepping stones for Tagore to further his criticism against the larger social discourses. What he is actually critiquing is the very mindset of the people. The refusal to open up, to adjust, to come to terms with the waves of modernity and this communal cultural religiosity is projected as the poet’s object of satire.

Interestingly, Tagore’s *Khapchara* does not only engage in criticizing certain institutions, but it also proposes probable solutions. In “Lyric no. 93”, being dissatisfied with traditionalism, Nilubabu informs Neyamat Dorji, “Listen, NeyamatDorji! / I no longer like the old fashion” (Tagore 129). Now, when Neyamat Miah designs a cloth with its button on the back and its whole on the front, Nilubabu cries out “Oh, what a surprise!” (129). Through this metaphor, Tagore here explores the urban inclination towards the new waves of modernism. Tagore suggests that the blind following towards modernity or a total negation to traditionalism would not suffice. Here, attacking the very mindset of the contemporary citizens of Kolkata, Tagore proposes the idea of a culture, i.e. the postcolonial construction of national culture as suggested by Frantz Fanon in his essay “On National Culture”, based on a proper synthesis of tradition and modernity. “Lyric no. 27” sums up the whole issue when Tagore writes “Leaving the comfort zone / She at last rises” (Tagore 35). Tagore’s *Khapchara* is actually a spontaneous urge to draw oneself out of one’s own comfort zone or ‘kholos’ to come to terms with the waves of modernity, but, along with a proper synthesis with tradition. Tagore not only portrays the characters through humour and fun, but also critiques the mindset of the people of the time.

In “Lyric no. 92”, Tagore explicates a journey towards Khulna and provides the vision of India which was undivided at that time, “If one needs to go to Khardah straight come for Khulna, / No matter how angry you get, who says this is wrong?” (Tagore 128). “Lyric no.104” introduces the urban space and its fleeting images graciously:

The tribe of foxes at Sealdah  
Keeps laughing all day listening to its sneeze,  
The Elephants of Hatibagan leave the city  
Running towards Bhagalpur. (Tagore 143)

Although Tagore portrays fun and humour, he also focuses on the textual images of the city. “Lyric no 81” stands as a parody of the urbanization of the city. Tagore explores the politics associated with class difference in this lyric as he writes:

If he gets those pots,  
River would flow through the city,  
Only he could not  
Because of the Potter's poverty. (Tagore 113)

“Lyric no 79” too introduces the character named Chintaharan who suffers economic crisis. “Lyric no 72” is again wrapped with humour. But the verse also showcases the city as a space full of crime ironically:

The path of Umedari  
Those were partners  
Where in Shyambazar,  
Where in Chowrangi  
...  
That torn umbrella, the thief  
Did not take, thanks to fate. (Tagore 101)

The hustle and bustle and the busy life of the urban space are explored through an unnamed character in “Lyric no 65”:

He lives in Kahalgah  
Office in Kaputola  
Arrives everyday at ten  
He rides an Ekka.  
Right when the corner arrived  
The bridle got stuck,  
As he was late,  
He shivers to death,

Gripping the Horse's tail  
He throws a fit. (Tagore 90)

Therefore, it would be pertinent to note that Tagore explores the urban space, especially Calcutta, through multiple perspectives. Playing with the established linguistic and literary conventions, Tagore infuses an element of high seriousness into *Khapchara*. This is evident when in the second prefatory verse, Tagore explains the four faces of Brahma, i.e. 'philosophy', 'Veda-recitation', 'poetry' and 'waves of excitement'.

Tagore's *Khapchara*, thus, is seen hovering between openness and rationale. 'Openness' is the use of nonsensical language and an attempt to criticize the mindset of the people and a proposal to maintain a culture based on a proper balance between tradition and modernity is the 'rationale'. A continuous tussle between openness and rationale is also evident in *Sahaj Path* where the speaker spontaneously questions, "Why does my father go to the office every day? / And not in a new country?" (Tagore 21). Here the speaker has a deliberate intention to ask his father to encounter the unknown new country instead of repeating his visit to the known portion named 'office'.

Tagore through his *Khapchara* inaugurates another broader question to the very idea of sense-making. The process of creation and reception of sense always function within 'the horizon of expectations'. The production of sense is dependent upon certain already existing norms and conventions. Tagorian nonsense follows these existing norms, codes of conduct, patterns of behaviour only to negate them. It also destroys certain traditional and conventional means of understanding 'sense' in order to foreground certain alternative ways of understanding sense. His nonsense is not merely about the rasa of whimsy, it is also about the creation of another kind of sense out of this apparently disordered arbitrary nonsensical world. The poems also argue the presence of enmeshed textuality of the city, especially Kolkata, through the genre of nonsense.

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