

***Khuddur Yātrā*: a Symphonic Poem of Texts and Images**

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Abstract

This essay offers an analysis of text-image relations in Abanindranath Tagore’s often overlooked work, *Khuddur yātrā*. The work is an experimental *yātrā*-play for children based on the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and was published in facsimile for the first time in 2009. The manuscript is illustrated with cutouts from newspapers, periodicals, and product wraps, creating a diverse visual landscape. The text of the play, equally complex, weaves together traditional *Rāmāyaṇa* heroes with new characters, while employing a multitude of languages and dialects. After providing a detailed overview of the work and categorizing text-image relations within it, this essay focuses on the single most complex and experimental one among those. Following Bachtin, who proposed to analyze literary work by using the musical concept of polyphony metaphorically, the author argues that the concept of symphonic poems provides the best way to approach the complexity of text-image congruencies in this work. Additionally, the essay explores some the thematic and visual connections between Abanindranath Tagore’s *Khuddur yātrā* and the broader landscape of Bengali children’s literature in the early 20th century. Upon closer examination, *Khuddur yātrā* emerges as a dynamic and layered artistic creation that challenges the viewer to construct new meanings when navigating the complex interplay of text and images. The text and images within the narrative perform various simultaneous functions, thereby encouraging both children and adults to construct, deconstruct, interpret, and reassess the surrounding reality. Abanindranath’s playful use of signs, symbols, and language reveals the intricate interconnectedness of the world, prompting viewers to recognize its complex and intertwined nature.

Keywords: text-image relations, Abanindranath Tagore, *Khuddur yātrā*, Bengali children’s literature

Writing with scissors¹

“There is no one else who can produce such instances of the craft of pure madness,” wrote Rabindranath Tagore to his nephew Abanindranath Tagore after going through some of the *yātrā-pālās*² (Tagore 2009, 16). He encouraged Abanindranath to publish them, yet the manuscript remained hidden from the public eye for almost seventy years. *Khuddur-yātrā* (Khuddu’s journey and also Khuddu’s *yātrā*) was published for the first time in 2009 in a facsimile edition. However, despite its original character—in relation to which poet and critic Sankha Ghosh, in his introductory article, considers *Khuddur yātrā* possibly the first collage in Bengali art (Tagore 2009)—this work remained even after its publication long unnoticed by researchers.³

Khuddur yātrā bālak bālikādiger janya likhita is a *yātrā*-play based on the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and was “written for boys and girls.” The 241-page manuscript, written between the years 1934-35 and 1942, is illustrated with cutouts from newspapers, periodicals, magazines, and product wraps. The illustrations include advertisements of various types, fragments of texts and captions, labels, logos, emblems, ornamental and abstract designs, fashion drawings, natural history drawings, photos, and doodles. These cutouts are placed on the pages in several ways; it can be a picture or a word cutout that is pasted onto the page. Sometimes, several cutouts are placed around or within the handwritten text. At times, collages are made from pictures, or from segments of images, words, and phrases. The placement of illustrations on the page also varies; these sometimes take up one or even two pages, and such a placement is sometimes of a tiny picture modestly claiming its own little corner of the page.

¹ The metaphor is taken from the book title: *Writing with Scissors: American Scrapbooks from the Civil War to the Harlem Renaissance* by Ellen Gruber Garvey (2013). The book is not used in the present article, as Abanindranath’s manuscript is not a scrapbook. But it would serve as a good starting point for anyone who is interested not only in the topic, but also in the mechanisms behind contemporary social media. It argues that people have long had a strong personal relationship to media. Like newspaper editors who enthusiastically “scissored” and reprinted attractive items from other newspapers, scrapbook makers passed their reading along to family and community. This book explains how their scrapbooks underlie our present-day ways of thinking about information, news, and what we do with it.

² In the context of the traditional performing arts of South Asia, particularly in regions like Bengal, *jatra* or *yātrā* is a popular form of folk theater. *Jatra* performances typically involve a combination of music, dance, and drama, and they often feature mythological or historical stories. Within the broader framework of *jatra*, the term *pālās* refers to individual acts or segments of the performance. These *pālās* serve as specific episodes or scenes within the overall narrative of the *jatra*. Each *pālā* contributes to the unfolding storyline, and plays a crucial role in conveying the plot to the audience. *Pālās* may vary in content, style, and theme, allowing for a diverse range of storytelling elements within the larger *jatra* performance.

³ At this point, I have encountered one publication in Bengali that focuses on the manuscript: খন্দুর যাত্রা। অবন ঠাকুরের কাটাক টির নতুন দুনিয়া by Debdutta Gupta in 2018. In English, three introductory articles (in which the authors called for a closer study of the work) were published in the supplementary volume and one article was published online, which, unfortunately, is not available anymore. I was happy to discover that, finally, *Khuddur yātrā* is slowly coming to the attention of the international scene, as I have come across an abstract of the presentation by Rupsa Kundu which focuses on the analysis of *Khuddur yātrā*: <https://solentva.hypotheses.org/translation-across-mediums>

The text of the play is as complex as its illustrations. It is shaped by the multiple voices of the traditional characters of the *Rāmāyaṇa* together with the new characters created by the author. The characters speak in Bengali and also in Sanskrit, Hindi, Maithili, Brajabuli, Oriya, and in dialects from West Bengal; all of these languages are written in Bengali script. Moreover, the lines of many characters are occasionally sprinkled with English words and phrases.

Abanindranath Tagore was not the only one to experiment with the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Some authors from colonial Bengal changed the epic's storyline either partly or entirely. The most famous examples of such texts are *Meghanād'bad kābya* (*The Slaying of Meghanada*) by Michael Madhusudan Dutt, written in 1861, in which Ravana, not Rama, is portrayed as a hero; and a play by Sukumar Ray *Lakṣmaṇer śaktisel* (*The Weapon of Lakshman*), a satire on the new Hindu middle class. Abanindranath also wrote *Khuddur yātrā* as a satirical play. Its storyline—as the narrators state in the introductory part—follows the storyline of Valmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, whereupon it was then rewritten “in simple language” by the “wise” Krittibas Odjha (Sen 1911, 170).⁴ However, the primary narrators are the chorus of children and representatives from the lower classes: Khudiram, Becaram (lit. sold Rama), Kenaram (lit. bought Rama), and Bidhiram, who sometimes transforms into Bidhibam (lit. misfortune). Working through the prism of his *Rāmāyaṇa-yātrā*, and using the voices of children and the underprivileged, Abanindranath satirizes and criticizes various aspects of his contemporary society.

A special place is given to the portrayal of the crisis of religious faith within the Hindu community, which is partly reflected in the names of narrators Kenaram and Becaram, which translate as “Bought Rama” and “Sold Rama,” by adding a *yātrā*-duet (Banerjee 1998, 105). Trijata (sometimes spelled Trijat) and Trijati (lit. those with three streaks of matted hair) is an old childless couple of Brahman caste. They follow the heroes throughout the journey, devising ways to make money from the places visited by Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita. Those financial strategies include setting up temples and also a confectionery named after Rama and Sita, starting a school to teach people to worship, and chanting the names of Rama and Sita. To emphasize the criticism of how religion is used commercially, snippets from newspapers with catchy phrases in English, such as

⁴ The *Kṛttivāsī rāmāyaṇ*, also known as *Śīrīrām pācālī*, was crafted by the fifteenth-century Bengali poet Krittibas Ojha. This rendition of the *Rāmāyaṇa* into Bengali follows the traditional *Rāmāyaṇa pācālī* from of Middle Bengali literature. It goes beyond being a mere rephrasing of the original Indian epic, serving as a vibrant mirror reflecting the societal and cultural nuances of Bengal throughout its circulation, spanning from the Middle Ages to the modern era.

“Religious faith: that driving force!” are pasted throughout the entire manuscript. Like advertising slogans, they shout at the reader, grab their attention, and together with images set the play’s *mise-en-scène* in contemporary social reality. Of course, the contemporaneity is also reflected through the text; however, the modern world bursts into the space of the pages by means of the cutouts, which make the satire all the more poignant, visual, and even tangible. For instance, the page where Surpanakha describes her passion and love for Rama and asks her servants to seek the means for her to marry him is illustrated with an advertisement for a face cream promising a fair complexion (Tagore 2009, 44). She is presented through the ad image of a dark-skinned man lacking beautiful facial features. He has stolen the face cream in the hope that after using it his complexion will become lighter and thus he himself handsome. It adds more humor to the whole situation; in the text, Surpanakha—a dark and ugly female demon—describes herself as being fairer and more beautiful than Sita.

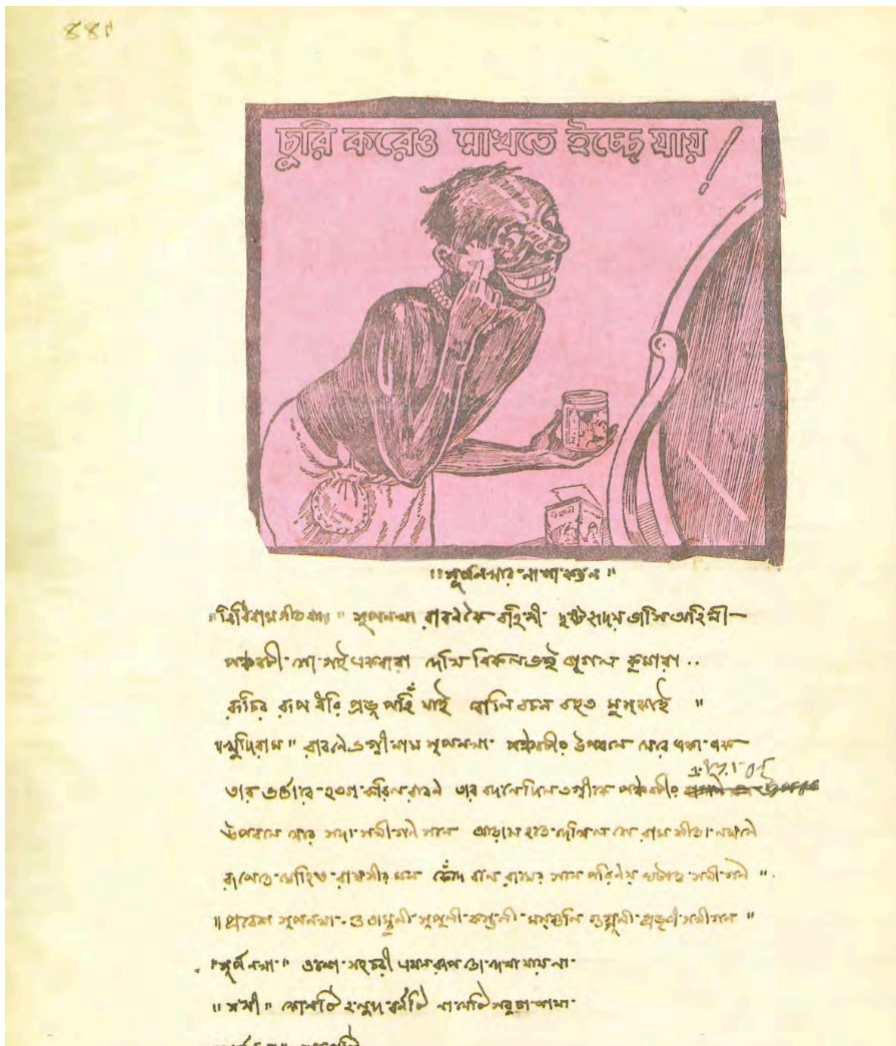


Figure 1:
Surpanakha
(Tagore 2009, 44)

Abanindranath's use of images in the manuscript goes far beyond mocking various aspects of life in his contemporary society. The diversity of relationships between texts and images is perhaps equal to the variety of pictures used in the manuscript; this is not surprising considering the scope of Abanindranath's oeuvre. He has experimented with text-image relations throughout his career by illustrating other authors' books and, later on, his own writings. With its sheer size, the *Rāmāyaṇa* allowed him to explore these interrelations on a different level. On the other hand, the *yātrā* form, with its carnivalesque nature (Bachtin 1996), allowed him to remove the boundaries of the ordinary and the conventional. By disrupting the distance inherent to the epic and the tragic character of *Rāmāyaṇa*, the form of the *yātrā* moves the depicted into the zone of familial contact. Its pathos and cheerful relativity prevent the reader's thoughts from stopping and becoming frozen in one-sided seriousness and certainty. Moreover, in taking advantage of the ambivalent nature of the carnivalesque, Abanindranath combines beauty with ugliness. He destroys the barriers between different styles and closed systems of thought, connects the distant, and unites the disconnected, portraying the reality of his contemporary world.

Overall, despite the constant experimentation conducted throughout the manuscript, we can systematize the text-image relations of the play by marking tendencies and defining several types of these relations, namely: direct illustrations, pun for fun,⁵ and text-image experiments. In this essay, I will focus on the latter group, as it is the most complex and experimental.

What else can words and pictures do?

Text-image experiments is an umbrella term for a wide-ranging group of *Khuddur yātrā*'s text-image relations, which I have further divided into different types. Perhaps another fitting name for this group would be "What else can words and pictures do?" For Abanindranath explores various ways of combining these two modes of expression. He experiments with different shapes and forms of illustrations. And he plays extensively with the capacities and meaning-making process of visual and verbal forms of expression.

⁵ The "pun for fun" group is based on verbo-pictorial puns, which take the *yātrā* to the world of children for whom Abanindranath created the play. Abanindranath's "pun for fun" group employs verbo-pictorial puns, such as homophonic plays on Bengali words, for instance, *lan̄kā* meaning both Sri Lanka and chilli peppers. Additionally, he uses metaphorical puns, transforming characters like Jambavan from the *Rāmāyaṇa* into a teddy bear and depicting Ravana as Santa Claus, drawing imaginative connections between their appearances and features.

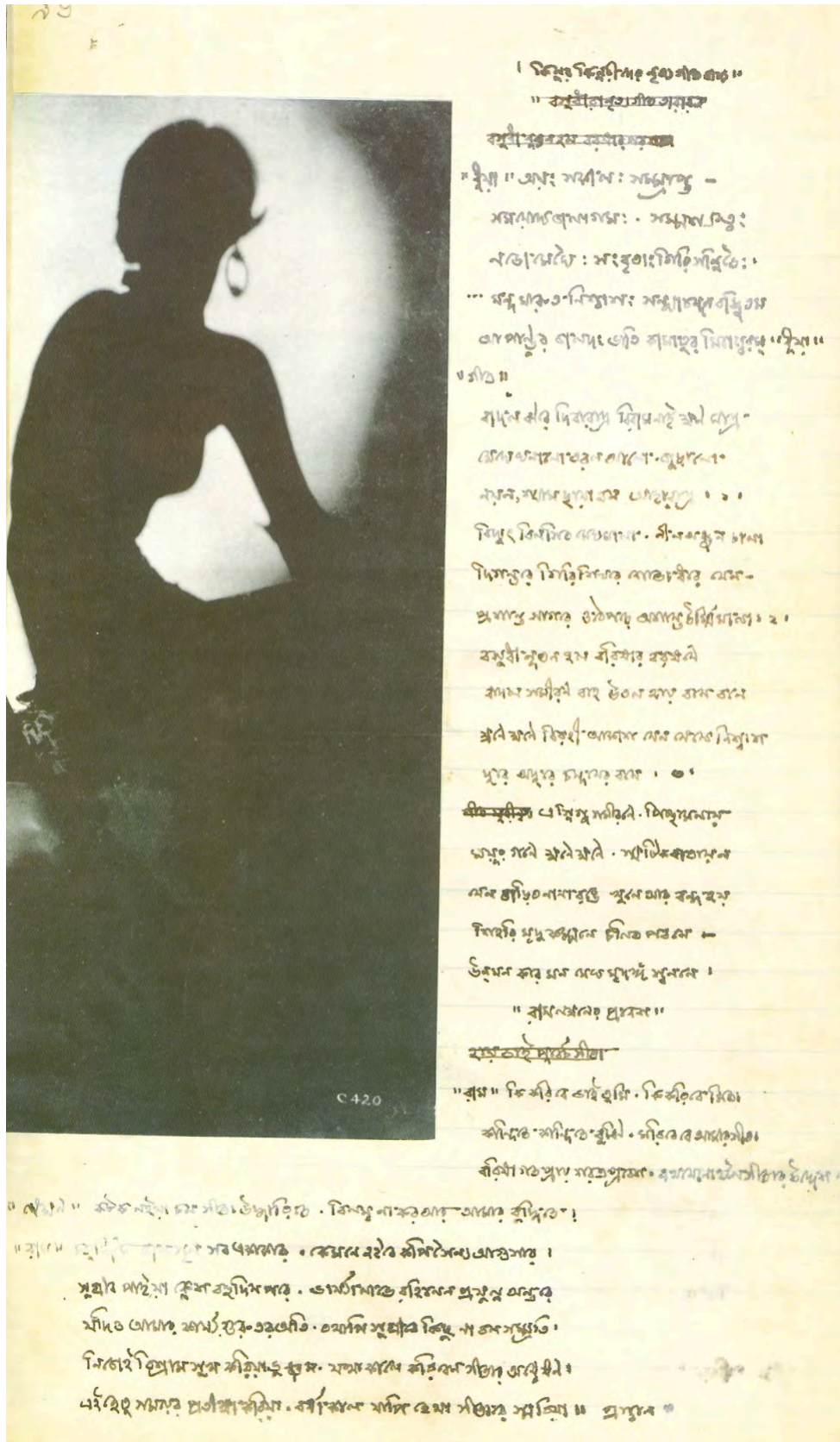


Figure 2: Sita (Tagore 2009, 96)

At times images practically become active figures; these alter our perception of the textual narrative. One such example is found on page 96. The text describes the suffering of Rama when separated from Sita. Celestial musicians—*kinnaras* and *kinnarīs*—open the scene by dancing and singing about the pain of being separated from one’s beloved during the rainy season. After that, Rama and Laksmana enter the stage where Rama talks about his worries, suffering, and desperation as heightened by Sita’s absence; Laksmana tries to console him. A photograph filling almost half of the page illustrates the scene. The image depicting a woman’s shadow emerging from the darkness against the white background can be seen as symbolizing the simultaneous presence and absence of Sita in the scene. Following Mitchell (2010) and Gell (1998), this page demonstrates the role that images can play, not only in narrating and representing but also in performing, acting, and doing. Although the presence and absence of the heroine pervade the text, we would without the picture have concentrated our attention on feelings and thoughts. The photograph brings the heroine to the forefront; in fact, her silhouette is what we see first when we open the page. And the photo makes Sita virtually appear as an active participant in the scene.

Abanindranath explores further illustrative possibilities by playing with visual and verbo-visual metaphors in the manuscript. They appear not only through the congruences between the text of the play and illustrations, but also in the texts and images in the cutouts, and in their relation to the *yātrā* text. For instance, to illustrate the scene in which Ravana defeats Jatayu, Abanindranath inserts the photograph of a Labor Day badge from Nazi Germany. Under the words “Tag der Arbeit” (Labor Day), the badge depicts Goethe’s head and an eagle with a hammer and sickle in its wings and a swastika wreath in its claws. The badge is dated 1934. The words “Labor Day” in their literal sense, i.e., as in the day of labor, serve as a metaphorical title for the scene. In a way, it is a day of hard labor for Jatayu—he fights Ravana with all his strength, and although defeated almost to the death, he strives to stay alive so that he can tell Rama and Laksmana what happened. The image of the eagle carrying a sickle, hammer, and wreath with a swastika, represents Jatayu. This image falls neatly into the context of the *yātrā*, where Jatayu was a son of Suryas’ charioteer.

Moreover, I argue that the photograph of the badge has another connection to the text. The fight scene between Ravana and Jatayu, who dies trying to save Sita, is one of the darkest moments in the *Rāmāyaṇa* plot. The year 1934, commemorated in the badge, is one of the darkest moments in world history.

This is the year in which Hitler became dictator of Germany, after ordering the murder of the SA (Sturmabteilung) leadership. The meeting of these two moments on the same manuscript page is no coincidence. In the text of *Khuddur yātrā*, Abanindranath repeatedly assesses and comments on the events taking place, not only in his own country but also elsewhere in the world, and this case is a perfect example. After the chorus and Khudiram's song about Jatayu's fall in the battle, and Sita's abduction, a bloodied eagle enters the stage. It begins its speech with the following words, which given the presence of the badge on the same page, can also serve as a reference to the events that took place in Germany in 1934: Religion is gone, truth is gone / All that remains is cruelty (*geche dharma geche satya āche nṛśnsatā*). Jatayu then laments that he could not save Sita even though he fought to the last, also lamenting the grief that will fall on Rama when he finds out, and so on. On the other hand, Abanindranath continues on the same page his pun for fun by again representing Ravana with a picture of Santa on a sleigh.

The multitude of meanings on the page can seem overwhelming. To navigate this complexity, I suggest employing the musical concept of a symphonic poem just in much the same way that Bachtin applied the musical concept of polyphony to analyze Dostoyevsky's novels (Bachtin 1996). A symphonic poem is a musical composition for an orchestra that illustrates or evokes the content of a poem, a story or novel, a painting, a landscape, or another non-musical source.⁶ The main compositional feature of the symphonic poem, which allows the content to be transmitted and transformed into a musical form to its fullest extent, is the development and interplay of new, often contrasting themes within the overall unity of the musical composition. To create this structure, composers use the following compositional practices: a cyclic form and a thematic transformation. A cyclic form is created through specific movements that are not only linked to but also reflect the content of one another. In turn, thematic transformation is a variation in which one theme changes not into a related or subsidiary theme but into something new, separate, and independent. Abanindranath often structures the text and images similarly on the pages of *Khuddur yātrā* and, in fact, throughout the whole composition of the play. Within the frame of the central theme, which repeats in a cyclic form, new themes and leitmotifs develop, at times contrasting or relating to each other, at times going into separate, independent directions, thus building the multiplicities of meanings.

⁶ One example of a symphonic poem is "Scheherazade" composed by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov in 1888 and based on *One Thousand and One Nights* (also known as *The Arabian Nights*): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vdnUBQT5Bqw&t=899s>

For example, on the page describing Jatayu's fall, the central theme is *Rāmāyaṇa*'s plot. And all the pictures on this page have in one sense or another to do with the scene. On the other hand, each picture either develops its themes (the Labor Day badge) or continues leitmotifs (Santa Claus on a sleigh) that have nothing to do with one another and can even be contrasting.

Other tunes and themes

Khuddur yātrā connects to the children's world not only through the text or through text-image relations that we have examined, but also through the images, by which I do not mean particular images, like pictures of toys or cartoon characters, but practically all of the cutouts that Abanindranath used to illustrate the manuscript. We can find the same variety of images in Bengali children's magazines and periodicals, subscriptions for which, by the first decades of the 20th century, ran into the thousands: Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri's *Sandeś*, Bhubanmohan Ray's *Sakhā o sāthī*, Barodakanta Majumdar's *Śīśu*, Shibnath Shastri and Hemchandra Sarkar's *Mukul*, to name but a few. All of these publications covered various topics: original fiction, folktales, foreign literature in translation, poetry, epic and mythological narratives, articles on popular science, history, travel, adventure and sport, as well as riddles and tales-in-pictures. Moreover, these magazines included pages with advertisements for different goods and products. Thus, by using the cutouts in *Khuddur yātrā*, Abanindranath practically recreated both the thematic and the page layouts in the children's magazines of his time.

According to Satadru Sen (Sen 2004), Bengali children's literature in general and Bengali magazines in particular can be defined by four primary geographies: the civilized abroad, the exotic abroad, the dysfunctional/comic/real home, and the nostalgic/fantastic/lost home.⁷ Similarly, we can map the world in *Khuddur yātrā*, whose geographies partly overlap with those suggested by Satadru Sen. Just like the Bengali script incorporates several languages in *Khuddur yātrā*, the text incorporates several spaces through plot and language. Within the epic space of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, we can trace the outlines of two other worlds: "the collective West" and "home." The collective West is a place of imported products, habits, and customs that are used and

⁷ I would not completely agree with the classification that Satadru Sen proposes in his article, for in my opinion, his "map" is simplified, at least in the case of *Khuddur yātrā*. But I find some of the categories useful and very fitting for the arguments made in this article.

appropriated by heroes (e.g., 5 o'clock tea, cold supper, etc.). The space of "home" is more complex. It incorporates spaces from the city and the countryside, also the comic and the tragic, the fantastic and the real, children and adults, and all classes of society. This home can be "dysfunctional" or "comic," as Satadru Sen puts it, especially when it comes to *bhadralok* (gentlefolk) and their understanding of the world and religion. At the same time, here in *Khuddur yātrā* home is almost not even a place, but rather a kaleidoscope of different folklore—*bratakthā*, folktale styles and characters, nursery rhymes, folk songs, street hawkers (*pherioyālā*), shout-outs etc.—interspersed with elements of epic tradition and the classics of Sanskrit literature such as Kalidasa.

Furthermore, it does not stop there as not only literary styles but also languages and dialects are mixed. Abanindranath creates this motley composition by taking advantage of the carnivalesque form of *yātrā* mentioned earlier, thereby depicting the multifaceted reality of contemporary Bengal.

By incorporating products from Bengal, the images not only contribute to shaping the representation of "home" on the map but also depict other locations, including the United States of America, Britain, collective Europe, various regions of India, South East Asia, and Africa. The USA is an exporter of movies, cartoons, "blackface" and caricatures of African-Americans. Britain trades in all sorts of products, Europe delivers politics and architecture, technology comes from all those places, dancers from South India and South East Asia, and Africa exports hoards of aboriginal armies dressed in loincloths and armed with spears.

As we can see, each part of the world has particular representations, which partly fall under Satadru Sen's categories of the civilized and exotic abroad. Yet, although Abanindranath introduces geographies, he does not always follow this labelling, especially when it comes to the "civilized" abroad. On the contrary, he often exposes and satirizes the consumption culture and his country's dependency on European products. For instance, even a *śibikā* (palanquin) in which a dying Bali is carried away by a group of bears is made in England (Abanindranath takes a wrapper for Morton's toffees printed with the words made in England and, as it appears on page 93, cuts it to the shape of a palanquin (Tagore, 2009).

The concept of the exotic abroad, on the other hand, is very much present, and in that area, Abanindranath acts more like a consumer of contemporary narratives than as one who exposes those. This becomes self-evident in the representations of black Africans and people of African descent, or more accurately, through the relations between text

and images that Abanindranath creates by using their portrayals. Following the narratives of his time (Mazumder 2019),⁸ which, whether circulating in or outside India, characterized Africans as primitive and which confined Black people to demeaning stereotypical images, Abanindranath uses satirical cartoons of African-Americans, and photos of actors using blackface and of African tribes to illustrate Hanuman's monkey army. For instance, the collage that illustrates the moment when Sugriva finally comes to the gates of Bali's palace and challenges him to battle portrays the character through the photograph of the "blackface" actor.⁹ On the pages describing the preparations for war, the picture of an armed African tribe illustrates the army of the monkeys, whereas the satirical cartoon of African-Americans portrays the monkey chiefs who came to meet with Rama.

⁸ Of course, the narratives from that time about the African continent were not all pejorative in tone. Often it was described as an exotic, fantastic place. And the notion of a primitive people was given the same romantic sentiment as evident in the description of rural Bengal. Nevertheless, their place in the racial and civilizational hierarchy was clearly defined. And the descriptions of natives were more often following the lines of uncivilized, uncouth, and coarse people who were depicted as barely clothed and as surviving by hunting, gathering, and stealing animals from trading communities, rather than following the lines of a people viewed as simple, joyful, and hospitable towards foreigners. For further reading on representations of Africa, see, for instance, Mazumder R (2019).

⁹ The upsetting fact is that these images are still not described correctly even today. In her 2015 presentation "Postcolonial Modernism: Possible Methodologies for a Transcultural History of Art" at an Art History seminar in Berlin, Areyee Gupta described the same picture as a picture of an African man: <https://www.art-histories.de/veranstaltungen/details/postcolonial-modernism-possible-methodologies-for-a-transcultural-history-of-art.html>

Conclusion

Whether as an expositor or consumer of the narrative, Abanindranath challenges anyone who comes across *Khuddur yātrā*, regardless of the age in which they do so, to build new meanings; and he challenges them to do so by using the knowledge that he or she has already acquired, and also by removing diverse elements from the contextual frame, leaving its initial meaning in the past. Through the text, the images become “performative, transformative and ask us to look more” (Favero 2021, 26); through their interrelatedness, the text and images do different—at times contradictory—things at once: representing and presenting, crafting, and connecting (Favero 2021, 26).

Children and adults, each on their own level, are prompted and sometimes even forced to construct, deconstruct, interpret, and reassess their surrounding reality. Playing with signs and signifiers (for instance, the symbol of the swastika) and using the ambivalent nature of images and language (as, for instance, in the group “pun for fun”), Abanindranath shows the viewer what a complex place the surrounding world is, where everything is interconnected and intertwined.

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