



Science fiction and Bengali literature

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Abstract

Science fiction represents a unique synthesis of imagination and scientific thought, creating a literary space where scientific possibilities are explored through fictional narratives. This paper examines the development, characteristics, objectives, and significance of science fiction, with particular emphasis on its evolution in Bengali literature. It briefly traces the history of science fiction from its emergence as a distinct literary genre in the West to its development in Bengali literary culture. The paper discusses the contributions of significant Bengali writers, including Jagadish Chandra Bose, Jagadananda Ray, Premendra Mitra, Satyajit Ray, Sunil Gangopadhyay, Humayun Ahmed and other notable authors. Their works demonstrate how scientific ideas, imagination, fantasy, humour and human concerns can be brought together within a literary framework. Particular attention is given to the Professor Shonku stories of Satyajit Ray and other representative works of Bengali science fiction. The paper also highlights the educational significance of science fiction, especially for adolescents, arguing that its imaginative appeal can encourage reading habits, scientific curiosity, creativity, research-oriented thinking and an inventive mindset. Thus, Bengali science fiction can be viewed not merely as a form of entertainment but as an important literary medium capable of fostering both literary sensibility and scientific awareness among young readers.

Keywords: Bengali literature, science fiction, Satyajit Roy, Sanku, Jagadish Chandra Bose

Introduction

The very term “Science Fiction” contains a duality. On the one hand, it suggests the realm of imagination and fantasy; on the other, it implies the authenticity and credibility of science. At the same time, the importance of imagination in the discovery or invention of something new cannot be overlooked. We know, for instance, that the aeroplane was invented many years after its first design had been conceived. Again, once something takes shape in the mind, its transformation into reality requires a detailed understanding of science and technology.

Science fiction is a synthesis of imagination and science. It is a literary genre that not only expands the power of imagination but also inspires people to engage with science.

Let us briefly examine what researchers have said while defining science fiction

“In a science-fiction story, an engineering achievement, the effects of an engineering achievement, or a disruption of a natural process is imagined—something whose experience humanity had not acquired before the writing was produced.”

▪ Edmund Crispin, *Best S.F. Stories*, 1955

“A science-fiction story is built around human beings and contains a human problem and a human solution; without its scientific content, such a story could never have been written.”

▪ Theodore Sturgeon, cited in James Blish, ..., 1964

“Science fiction is a distinct branch of fantasy in which the process of deliberately sustaining the reader’s disbelief becomes much easier to understand, because its imaginary predictions concerning physical science, space, time, social

science and philosophy are nurtured within an atmosphere of scientific possibility.”

▪ Sam Moskowitz, *Seekers of Tomorrow*, 1966

Characteristics

From the above definitions, we can easily identify the primary characteristics of science fiction:

Science fiction is a literary genre that is fundamentally dependent on imagination.

Science fiction is generally centred on human beings and their everyday lives.

This genre necessarily possesses a scientific basis. However, that basis does not always have to conform to scientifically verifiable calculations or established scientific facts.

An element of romance and fantasy is present in science fiction.

Science fiction contains certain elements that may appear unbelievable.

Science fiction essentially enables us to explore a world beyond ordinary reality while remaining rooted in the soil of reality. We do not always wish to confine our minds to everything that is possible within everyday life.

When the child’s mind cannot unravel all the mysteries of the world, it resorts to imagination and fantasy. As a person grows older, however, a clearer understanding of the possible and the impossible gradually restricts the imaginative mind. Science fiction has therefore become important in literature because it enables us to nurture this creative world of imagination within ourselves. At the same time, it remains connected to a scientific foundation.

Science fiction is therefore particularly useful for adolescents. At a stage when an imaginative mind gradually begins to be affected by the harsh realities of life, reading science fiction can, on the one hand, allow young readers to

travel through the world of imagination and, on the other, encourage them to develop a scientific spirit of inquiry.

Objectives

The objectives of discussing science fiction are as follows

1. To make readers aware of the multifaceted usefulness of reading science fiction.
2. To keep the imaginative faculties alive among adolescents and young people.
3. To develop a scientific outlook alongside an imaginative mind.
4. To cultivate an inventive and innovative mind among young people so that they become interested in creating scientific instruments and making discoveries themselves.
5. To explore the history of the development of science fiction and to understand when, why and how it emerged as an important literary genre.
6. To create awareness about literary reading. Since the subject is attractive and engaging, adolescents can easily develop the habit of reading science-fiction books and thereby improve their reading skills.
7. Since science fiction has been written by renowned and learned authors, reading their works can improve young readers' linguistic abilities and enhance their proficiency in Bengali writing.
8. Through reading science fiction, adolescents can simultaneously develop an interest in literature and become oriented towards science.
9. Reading Bengali science fiction, together with the references found in it, can encourage young readers to explore English literature and English science fiction. Consequently, they can develop the ability to undertake comparative studies between the two.
10. Science fiction helps adolescents understand the distinction between science and science fiction. Through science fiction, readers can also begin to understand whether they possess an interest in science.

History of Science Fiction

The world's first science-fiction magazine made its appearance in the American publishing market on 5 April 1926. At that time, however, the term "science fiction" had not yet been coined. The magazine, titled **Amazing Stories**, was edited by Hugo Gernsback, who coined the term "science fiction" three years later.

The purpose of filling the pages of **Amazing Stories** effectively helped establish not only the publication itself but also science fiction as an independent literary genre. In 1908, Gernsback wrote a book on radio broadcasting entitled **The Wireless Telephone**. Around 1919, he began to think seriously about science-fiction-type writing for the magazine **Modern Electrics**.

Gernsback's stories were largely concerned with technological subjects such as weather control, plastic materials, tape recorders, television and other technological developments. After **Amazing Stories**, Gernsback went on to edit magazines such as **Science Wonder Stories**, **Air Wonder Stories** and **Science Wonder Quarterly**. However, the monotony and lack of realism in these works eventually tired readers.

After Gernsback, W. Campbell Jr. edited **Astounding Stories**. Campbell was known as a "guru of the engineering mind." He gave opportunities to several young writers who subsequently became renowned science-fiction authors.

The first science-fiction comic strip, **Buck Rogers**, appeared in 1928, followed by the emergence of **Superman**

in 1938. Alongside such science-fiction picture stories came works such as **Donald Duck**, **The Lone Ranger** and **Babar**. In this way, science fiction, which had gradually developed through **Amazing Stories**, eventually established its own distinct literary and popular form.

Among the notable writers of science fiction in world literature are Jules Verne, H. G. Wells and Isaac Asimov. Jules Verne's **Around the World in Eighty Days** and **Children of Captain Grant** are noteworthy. Asimov's **The End of Eternity** and **Foundation** are also worthy of mention, as are the works of Ray Bradbury.

The Practice of Science Fiction in Bengali

The practice of science fiction in Bengali began in a turbulent period after the First World War. Science fiction entered Bengali literature through the work of a scientist himself—Jagadish Chandra Bose. He is regarded here as the father of Bengali science fiction.

His work **Shukra Bhraman** is described as the first science-fiction work in Bengali literature. He subsequently wrote **Abyakta**. In 1303 Bengali Era, **Niruddeshher Kahini** was published in the Kuntalin Puraskar volume. Bose later revised this work and gave it the title **Palatak Tufan**.

Jagadish Chandra Bose added the subtitle "scientific mystery" to **Niruddeshher Kahini**. Long before the compound term "science fiction" became established in English through the combination of science with fiction or fantasy, Jagadish Chandra independently created and employed this Bengali conceptual formulation.

Even before Jagadish Chandra Bose, Jagadananda Ray had written science fiction. His work presented Bengali readers with an early journey to another planet and an encounter with intelligent extraterrestrial beings.

After this, there was a decline in the production of Bengali science fiction for some time. Later, Rajendralal Acharya introduced Jules Verne to Bengali readers. From 1918 onwards, he translated **Around the World in Eighty Days**, **Five Weeks in a Balloon**, **Journey to the Centre of the Earth** and **Journey to the Moon**.

Bengali readers had to wait for approximately another thirty-five years for translations of H. G. Wells. In 1356 Bengali Era, a translated volume of Wells's works was published under the editorship of Nripendrakrishna Chattopadhyay. Among the translators were Binoy Ghosh, Sunil Gangopadhyay and Nirmal Chandra Gangopadhyay, among others.

In the treasury of Bengali science fiction, Sukumar Ray occupies a unique position. Drawing upon Arthur Conan Doyle's **The Lost World**, he created the remarkable science-fiction parody **Heshoram Hushiarer Diary**.

Other notable works mentioned include Meghduter Martye Agaman, Amanushik Manush, Asambhaber Deshe and Mayabatir Mayakanan.

In 1882, Hemlal Dutta wrote **Rahasya**, which was published in the magazine **Bigyan Darpan**.

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, the celebrated writer and intellectual, is regarded as the first woman science-fiction writer in Bengali literature. Her **Sultana's Dream**, published in 1905 according to the source, can be regarded as a work of feminist science fiction.

Notable Writers of Science Fiction

Premendra Mitra was the first writer in Bengali literature to begin writing science fiction regularly. His first science-

fiction story, ** Pipre Puran **, was published in the magazine Ramdhanu in 1931.

The story begins

“Once upon a time, long ago, everything was wonderfully strange. The sun used to rise exactly at dawn, and, amusingly enough, it would set before night actually arrived.”

After Pipre Puran, Premendra Mitra wrote a number of science-fiction works, including Mayadanaber Dweep, Patale Panch Bachar, Monster Kahini, Akash-er Atanka, Dushwapner Dweep and Abishwasya, dealing with subjects such as mysterious islands, intelligent beings living beneath the sea, civilizational crises and fantastic adventures.

The character Mamaybabu, a completely Bengali figure who practises fine arts, loves food and is round and bald-headed, subsequently became the hero of several of Premendra Mitra's stories, including Kuhoker Deshe, Dragoner Nishwas and Paharer Naam Karali. Later, Ghanada emerged and surpassed even Mamaybabu in popularity.

In 1961, Satyajit Ray began writing science fiction in connection with his editorial work for the magazine Sandesh. His first story in this genre was ** Byomjatrir Diary **. Through this work, Ray gradually developed his own distinctive style of science fiction.

Satyajit Ray subsequently created the famous Professor Shonku series. Trilokeshwar Shonku became one of the most memorable scientists in Bengali literature. The Shonku series eventually consisted of 29 remarkable stories and became an invaluable part of Bengali literature.

Professor Shonku uses his inventive abilities to create a variety of extraordinary objects—sometimes an annihilation pistol, sometimes the Botika Indica pill, and sometimes even a replica of a human being, or a robot. The character of Abinash Babu, Shonku's neighbour, also introduces an element of humour into the scientific environment.

Among the notable Professor Shonku stories are Shonkur Shonir Dasha, Shonkur Subarna Sujog, Hypnogen, Marurahasya, Professor Shonku O Robu, and others. Ray also wrote outstanding science-fiction stories in collections such as Ek Dojon Goppo, Aro Ek Dojon Goppo and Eker Pithey Dui.

Other notable science-fiction stories by Satyajit Ray include Mayurkanthi Jelly, Ank Sir, Golapibabu O Tipu, Sabuj Manush, Alien, Swapnadweep, Septopaser Khide, Professor Hijibijbij and Pterodactyl Dim.

Through these works, Satyajit Ray achieved an extraordinary synthesis of literature, science and imagination.

One of his finest stories is ** Bankubabur Bandhu **. Bankubabu has taught Geography and Bengali at a primary school in Kankurgachhi for twenty-two years. No one has ever seen this apparently timid and ordinary man become angry.

He encounters an extraterrestrial being named Ang in Panchu Ghosh's bamboo grove. Ang fulfils Bankubabu's unfulfilled desire to travel beyond the Earth and instils confidence in him. His arrival serves a humane and benevolent purpose: to free Bankubabu from his inferiority complex.

Except for humanitarian and beneficial purposes, extraterrestrial beings do not generally appear in Satyajit Ray's stories. In this context, Mahakashar Doot may also be mentioned. The visitors in that story are concerned about food, environmental pollution, energy problems and natural disasters affecting human society.

The notable poet and novelist Sunil Gangopadhyay, as well as the immensely popular writer from Bangladesh Humayun Ahmed, enriched Bengali literature by writing numerous science-fiction stories.

The Bishwamama and Nil Manush series are unique in Bengali literature in terms of language and the construction of science-fiction themes. Among the stories in these series are Bishwamama O Nakal Phool, Bishwamama O Beralbhut and Nilmanusher Kahini. Other noteworthy works include Ajab Larai, Deyaler Sei Chhobi, Meghchor and Sadhubabar Hat.

In Meghchor, a scientist named Purandar Choudhury masters the art of collecting clouds from different countries. As a result, he can cause more rain in whichever country he chooses, while other countries suffer from drought.

The story is significant not merely as science fiction but also for its potential to create moral awareness among adolescents.

The three-volume ** Science Fiction Samagra ** of Humayun Ahmed has further enriched Bengali science fiction. His notable science-fiction works include Omega Point, Jadukar, Kudduser Ek Din, Irina, Ananta Nakshatrabithi, Newton-er Bhul Sutra, Ditiyo Manab, Ayna, Tahera, Ni, Somporko, Ima, Jantro, Nimadhyama, Fiha, Samikaran, Tomader Jonno, Bhalobasha, Tara Tinjon, Kuhak and Onnyobhubon.

Besides these writers, Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay, Adrish Bardhan, Anish Deb, Syed Mustafa Siraj and Zafar Iqbal, the brother of Humayun Ahmed, have also made significant contributions to the world of Bengali science fiction.

Conclusion

Isaac Asimov's famous statement,

“Today's science fiction is tomorrow's science fact,”

reinforces the purpose of engaging with science fiction.

All the writers discussed here are highly talented and accomplished authors. Each of them has demonstrated considerable skill and expertise in their respective literary fields. When such writers turn to science fiction, their command of language and literary sensibility enrich scientific narratives. The combination of gripping plots and lucid Bengali prose makes these books particularly attractive to young readers.

Through reading such works, adolescents can develop an emotional connection with literature. At the same time, young readers who may initially be indifferent to science can become attracted to scientific subjects through the compelling narratives of science fiction. As a result, alongside an appreciation of literature, they may develop a love for science, a desire for research and an inventive spirit.

Therefore, as teachers and students of Bengali literature, I believe that it is extremely important to introduce Bengali science fiction to students and encourage them to read it.

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