The Curious Case of “The Alien”: Satyajit Ray vs. Steven Spielberg

_Somdatta Mandal_

In the simple, yet informative introduction to his own collection of _Stories_, Satyajit Ray had explained his own predicament of becoming a storyteller. Though the primary interest was nostalgic - to revive his grandfather Upendrakishore Ray’s journal _Sandesh_, which had died a premature death with Sukumar Ray, his father - Ray also mentions his “special fascination” for “straightforward tales as well as tales of the fantastic and supernatural”:

Some of the stories I have written reflect my love for Verne and Wells and Conan Doyle whose works I read as a schoolboy…..I enjoy writing stories for its own sake and derive a pleasure from it which is quite distinct from the pleasure of the vastly more intricate business of making a film. I have written stories both during the making of a film and in the free period - usually lasting about six months - between films.

One such story written and illustrated for _Sandesh_ was entitled “Bankubabur Bandhu” (“Banku Babu’s Friend”). In this story, the protagonist Banku Babu is a timid and good-natured school teacher teaching geography and Bangla at Kakurgachi Primary School in a remote village of Bengal. Apart from being a constant target of the pranks of his students, he was also regularly leg-pulled by the village elders, who gathered every evening to wile away their time in the typical Bengali ‘adda’, discussing anything and everything under the sun. On most occasions, in spite of his utter dislike, Banku Babu was the butt of ridicule. One dark Tuesday evening, on his way home from one of these ‘adda’ jaunts, and ruminating upon the discussion of spaceships, rockets, and people from other planets, Babkubabu decides to take the shortcut through a neighbor’s bamboo grove. The eerie silence and a strange glow of light there drew his attention to a spacecraft radiating in pink light. He stood still, rather hypnotized till a strange outlandish creature, who identified himself as ‘Ang” befriended him. Hailing from a planet called “Kranius”, Ang has a long conversation with Banku Babu, establishing his superiority over homo sapiens, and by thought-reading even helped the awe-struck rustic school teacher visualize all his cherished dreams - a visit to the North Pole with its polar bears,
walruses, its Aurora Borealis, et al; then a trip to the deep Amazonian forests of Brazil with its anacondas, its crocodiles, and flesh-eating piranha fish. Ang also gives him a moral dictum not to suffer ignominy or humiliation without protesting because that is the secret of a successful life. Instilling this courage, Ang leaves and Banku Babu becomes a totally different man, much to the surprise of his unfriendly friends.

About four years after publication of this story, Ray wrote to his biographer Marie Seton in February 1966:

I am already at work on two more stories - both original. One a science fiction story involving a spaceship with only one supremely intelligent Martian occupant landing on the outskirts of a remote village with as little contact with ‘civilisation’ as possible. The Martian was first taken for a monster, then for a God - and so, on. This story was named “The Alien” and in spite of several dissimilarities with “Banku Babu’s Friend”, any discerning reader realizes that it is a complex variation of the earlier story. The Alien is a small humanoid creature whose spaceship splashes down in a pond in a Bengali village far from the metropolis. There it is promptly taken to be a submerged temple which has risen up, because a golden spire can be seen sticking out of the lotus-covered surface of the pond, and most of the locals begin to worship it. Those who do not include Haba, a poor village orphan boy who survives off stolen fruit and beggary and who forms a rapport with the creature after it has entered his dreams at night and played with him; Mohan, a sceptical journalist from Calcutta, and Joe Devlin, a ‘can-do’ American engineer from Montana, who distrusts anything he has not personally experienced. He is in the backwoods area to drill tube-wells on behalf of a rich Marwari industrialist called Bajoria. On seeing the golden spire, Bajoria instantly perceives its possibilities as ‘the holiest place in India’. He wants Devlin to pump out the pond, so that he can cover the floor of that pond with marble, and build marble steps leading down from all four sides, and arches and pillars, and a little marble plaque to say: ‘Salvaged and restored by Gaganlal Laxmikant Bajoria’!

Apart from his intention of collecting samples from the earth, the Alien has other ideas. Consumed with playful curiosity about the world in which it has just landed, it gets
up to all sorts of mischief: ripening a villager’s corn overnight, making a mango tree belonging to the meanest man in the village fruit at the wrong time of the year, causing an old man’s corpse on its pyre to open its eyes in front of his grandson, and other pranks. In Ray’s own words:

The Alien is a cross between a gnome and a famished refugee child: large head, spindly limbs, a lean torso. Is he male or female? We don’t know. What its form basically conveys is a kind of ethereal innocence, and it is difficult to associate either great evil or great power with it; yet a feeling of eeriness is there because of the resemblance to a sickly human child.

Satyajit Ray wrote the film script of *The Alien* in early 1967. In this script he is “an amalgamator of his established realist style with sequences of fantasy bounded by scientifically valid images. It was conceived as an exclusive kind of science fantasy - many-stranded and ironic”. Ray’s description of the Alien’s first exploratory expedition on Earth gives a fine sense of the creature’s magical powers and of the whimsical charm of Ray’s screenplay, which distinctly recalls the mixture of fantasy and human frailty in the imaginary world of his father Sukumar, and the multi-colored diary of his eccentric uncle Chotokaka:

In a series of fantastically quick, short steps over the lotus leaves, the Alien reaches the shore of the pond. He looks down at the grass, examines a blade, and is off hopping into the bamboo grove.

**BAMBOO GROVE - NIGHT**
There the Alien sees a small plant. His eyes light up with a yellow light. He passes his hand over the plant, and flowers come out. A thin, soft, high-pitched laugh shows the Alien is pleased. He plucks a flower, puts it in his mouth, and hops on all fours to an ant-hill. He pokes the ant-hill with his fingers, and causes agitated ants to swarm out of their holes. The Alien’s eyes turn blue.

**MICRO-DETAIL OF ANTS**
The Alien observes the ants microscopically, and attunes his ears to make audible the sounds made by the insects. Looking up, the Alien laughs to see a swarm of fireflies dancing round a mango tree. He leaps up, catches hold of a mango branch and keeps swinging, while the fireflies dance around him.
Poised in mid-air, the Alien sees Haba’s shack. He goes flitting through the air to reach the door of the shack. He peers inside.

INTERIOR OF HABA’S SHACK - NIGHT

The Alien sees Haba huddled in sleep on a mat. The Alien’s eyes now turn glowing red.

PROCESS SHOT

This enables him to see Haba’s respiratory system, and to listen to his regular heart-beats.

PROCESS SHOT

The red in the Alien’s eyes turns violet, enabling him to look into Haba’s brain, and sink into his subconscious.

HABA’S DREAM

Haba is dreaming, and the Alien becomes part of his dream. We see Haba and the Alien happy, playing hide-and-seek in a strange black-and-white world of geometrical forms.

INTERIOR OF HABA’S SHACK - NIGHT

The light in the Alien’s eyes now dims, and with another high-pitched laugh, he is gone from the bamboo grove.

PADDY FIELD - NIGHT

The Alien now arrives at the paddy-field. The wide open spaces seem to delight him, and he dances around for a while. Then he notices the withering crop and examines a paddy plant. His eyes turn yellow, and he goes whirling about in the field while all the paddy around him ripens and stands aspiring in the moonlight. Standing on the tip of a ripe paddy plant, the Alien looks up at the sky.

NIGHT SKY WITH MOON

He sees the nearly full moon in the sky, and seems fascinated by it.

PADDY FIELD - NIGHT

The Alien turns on his telescopic green eyelights.

NIGHT SKY WITH MOON

The moon is brought up for close inspection, so that its gigantic orb marked with craters and mountains and valleys now fills a good half of the sky. Inspection over, the Alien pushes the moon back into place.

PADDY FIELD - NIGHT

The Alien now jumps off the plant and flits back laughing to the spaceship.

FADE OUT

Apart from this story, Ray’s oeuvre then included two ideas which he agrees are also precursors of *The Alien*, although he was unconscious of the links when writing the film’s script. The first is from *The Philosopher’s Stone*, - the stone itself which falls from
the skies in a shower of rain, plays havoc with society, and vanishes. The second is the singing Nepalese beggar-child in *Kanchenjungha* who trails behind the visitors from Calcutta. “The Alien and the child in *Kanchenjungha* could be very close,” says Ray, “because the child is the only one who belongs to Darjeeling but is unaware of the fact. He’s the only one who’s free, who has no problems.”

Right from his first visit to Hollywood in 1958, Ray had nurtured the wish of making a Hollywood film and this received further impetus after his correspondence and acquaintance with Arthur C. Clarke in 1964. Ray had first written to Clarke in Sri Lanka asking him for his good wishes for a science-fiction film club he and others started up in Calcutta. Later he met Clarke personally in Hollywood where they had been watching Stanley Kubrick shooting *Space Odyssey 2001*. Ray outlined an idea he hoped to film and Clarke subsequently introduced him to the producer Collin Wilson, who showed great interest in producing the film and sold the script to Columbia Pictures for $90,000. Though Ray got nothing, he was given to understand that *The Alien* was going to be filmed. “When a man like that writes and tells you that he is ready to set up a co-production deal for you [with Clarke’s financial backing], you are inclined to take his word on trust”, wrote Ray many years later in a long, witty newspaper account of the project’s history entitled “Ordeals of the Alien”, that appeared in the Calcutta Statesman in 1980. A Bangla interview published in a Calcutta science-fiction journal testifies this further.

Although Ray had been warned against teaming up with Wilson by Marie Seton at a very early stage, he accepted the idea would help him in procuring foreign finance on terms acceptable to him: that the story should be shot entirely in India (with effects done in Hollywood), in Bengali and English together, and that he would have final festival cut (though not final cut for the release of the film). It was decided that in January 1968, the shooting would begin at Bolpur, about five hours drive from Calcutta. Peter Sellers was to play the role of Bajoria. During this period, Ray ventured to Hollywood once again. There, at Ravi Shankar’s house he met Peter Sellers (who at that time was shooting another film called *The Party*), and the deal was finalized. Columbia Pictures, it is said,
gave the green signal for the finances and there was even a verbal contract with Solbus to look after the special effects. Marlon Brando was thought to be the most suitable actor to play Devlin’s role. When everything was settled, suddenly the producer Collin Wilson backed out and shelved the project. An ability to wheel and deal was not one of Ray’s skills, but he had some respect for it in others. Since Ray had avoided signing a contract, he was witness to a curious manipulation and he returned to Calcutta with his hopes alternately raised and then dashed. In October that same year Ray went to London expecting to meet Sellers again, James Coburn (as a possible Devlin) and Columbia UK, who had taken over the project. When the Columbia executive in charge of the project eventually managed to get Ray alone, he asked him if Wilson had passed on the ten thousand dollar advance made to Ray for the screenplay. Ray had received not a cent of it. “By now I had begun to feel like a full-fledged Kafka hero,” he wrote later. The copyright of Ray’s screenplay seemed lost and in July 1968, Ray received a letter from Peter Sellers stating that the role of Bajoria was too small and would not suit him. Ray replied in verse:

Dear Peter, if you had wanted a bigger part
Why, you should have told me so right at the start.
By declaring it at this juncture
You have simply punctured
The Alien balloon
Which I daresay will now be grounded soon
Causing a great deal of dismay
To Satyajit Ray.

There was no answer to this from Sellers. Three weeks later Ray wrote to Seton prosaically that the project had “begun to assume an aura which I found both distasteful and disconcerting” and that he had more or less decided to call it off. In the meantime Columbia was still assuring Ray that they would make the picture, subject to the withdrawal of Mike Wilson. The screenplay which was submitted by Ray contained all his sketches and details (in the typical Ray tradition) especially his visualization of the alien. In the meantime, Ray started working on Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen, the Hollywood script still lying in Columbia’s vault. The last letter from Wilson to Ray said: “Dear Ravana, you may keep Seetha. She’s yours, keep her and make her and the world happy”.12
For the next ten years and more Ray was variously encouraged to revive the project - by Ismail Merchant, by Sellers’ ex-agent, by Columbia and others (including Wilson!) - and he continued to treat it as possible. It was not until the appearance of Spielberg’s two films *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and *E.T.* (as well as another film with the same title as Ray’s) that he gave up hope. Ray’s biographer Marie Seton, who knew the details of Ray’s plan and had also seen his script of *The Alien*, was taken by surprise and wrote that Spielberg was surely influenced by Ray’s script and had borrowed a lot of ideas from it. In 1979, another Hollywood film called *Alien* was released with D. Ridley Scott as its director. A typical space-age horror film reverting to the 1950s formula, it added stomach-churning violence, slime, and shocks. It is the story of a commercial spacecraft unwittingly taking on an alien being which wreaks merciless havoc on the crew. But the similarity ends there. In 1980, Spielberg created another version of *Close Encounters*, which too had a lot of affinities with the Ray script. Satyajit had already found the Hollywood experience rather disappointing as the two 1980 articles in the Calcutta daily, *The Statesman*, entitled “The Ordeals of The Alien” show:

I had found upon arriving in Hollywood mimeographed copies of my script piled up on the table in the room marked office in the cottage where he (Wilson) stayed. They bore the surprising legend: “Copyright Mike Wilson and Satyajit Ray”. I had mentioned to Mike and he had explained it was to make doubly sure that my interests were protected. “Two heads are better than one, Maestro”. Beyond suggesting that I use the term ‘broad’ instead of ‘Chick’ in the American’s dialogue, Mike had made no contribution to the screenplay I could think of.13

In 1982, when Satyajit Ray and his wife were present at the Venice Film Festival, another surprise surfaced in the form of Steven Spielberg’s *E.T.: The Extra Terrestrial*. He discovered that this new film too (which began life as a Columbia project) had several affinities with the original script, including the physical features of E.T.14 - the benign nature of the creature, and the fact that it is ‘small and acceptable to children and possessed of certain superhuman powers - not physical strength but other kinds of powers, particular types of vision and that it takes an interest in earthly things,’ said Ray later. “The appearance of my Alien was much more interesting though. Mine didn’t have any eyes. It had sockets so the human resemblance was already destroyed to some extent.
Ray understood the success of Spielberg’s alien though he found *E.T.* ‘a bit corny at times’. But he did not care for the extent to which the alien had been humanised. “It ought to be more subtle than that”, he said. “But the children are marvellous. Spielberg has talent in handling children; I’m not sure about otherwise”.

Someone else who had obviously spotted the similarities was Arthur C. Clarke who had described them as ‘striking parallels’. He telephoned Ray from Colombo in January 1983 and suggested that he write politely to Spielberg and point out the resemblances. “Don’t take it lying down”, he said, according to ray. In 1984, Clarke also wrote a letter to the London *Times* supporting Ray. Though ray was certain that the filming of *E.T.* would not have been possible without his script, he was not interested in pursuing the matter further, stating that “artists have better things to do with their time”. Spielberg however, denied the charge and on a visit to Sri Lanka later told Clarke ‘rather indignantly’ that he was only a kid in high school when ray’s script was circulating in Hollywood. Of course this does not really resolve the doubts. In an interview given to Denise Worrell in June 1985, Spielberg categorically stated:

*Close Encounters of the Third Kind* was born when I was about five or six years old. My dad came into my room one night and he woke me up and he said, ‘Come with me’. It was dark and it was right in the middle of the night and I was scared……..He drove me about twenty minutes and then we stopped, and there were a thousand people lying on their backs on picnic blankets in a big meadow, looking up at the sky. …we looked up and the whole sky was alive with what looked like hundreds of points of light darting here and there across the heavens. It was a meteor shower….. I think *Close Encounters* was born right there. My whole fascination with alien begins coming to Earth to live and exchange cultures, ideas, and emotions - that was all born right there instantly.\(^{16}\)

In the same interview, Spielberg reiterated that his most successful movies all derive from his own childhood, a place he still visits. Regarding *E.T.: The Extra Terrestrial*, (“My
first taste of surrogate parenthood. I really felt like everybody’s father on that film¹⁷) he also offered similar logical explanations of its conception and execution:

E.T. was always there. It came from as deep a place inside me as any person can probe, but I don’t think I had to reach very deep to make this movie. It just took thirty four years to float up to the surface. It took a long time for me to make a movie like that. I had to get a certain place in my development as a person to be emotionally ready to make E.T. Having purged myself of a lot of things in making Poltergeist, I was ready for E.T., which was a beautiful thing to direct and work on. It was the best experience I’ve ever had making a film……It was the first time I ever wanted to have kids of my own. I think if E.T. was inspired by anything, it wasn’t by the science fiction of the fifties and sixties but my own upbringing in a divorced family. E.T. is about a family that mends itself in an extraordinary way.¹⁸

In another instance, repeating this viewpoint almost verbatim, Spielberg describes E.T. to be his most personal film, corresponding closest to his own innermost memories, experiences and fantasies:

I can’t really say that E.T. dropped out of the sky and hit me on the head without a number of experiences from the time my father made me go with him at 3am to watch a meteor shower when I was six years old and I suddenly realized that the sky up there and the stars are worthy of closer scrutiny - all the way to the time I saw The Wizard of Oz and Peter Pan and every Disney film ever made and all the films of Hitchcock and Kubrick and read all the novels of Steinbeck and Faulkner and all the experiences I ever had in elementary and grammar school and high school and college to bring me to a place in my life where I found myself standing in the Sahara Desert shooting Raiders of the Lost Ark….lonely and depressed, making this crazy movie with dust and airplanes and whips and snakes….and, indeed, something did fall out of the sky and hit me on the head in the shape of a small, fat, little, squashy character named E.T.¹⁹

However sincere Spielberg’s explanation may sound, over the years Ray sympathizers felt that the similarities with “The Alien” script is much more than accidental. In the Hollywood film, the title character, which was designed by Carlo Rimbaldi, is a sweet little wide-eyed alien with childlike qualities (although we can deduce that he is an adult) and the power to heal and cause dying planets to bloom
instantly and objects to fly. In the opening of the film, E.T. is studying earth plant life in the woods near a California suburb when he is accidentally left behind by his spaceship, which leaves hurriedly to avoid detection. While U.S. government agents and scientists search for him, he wisely hides out. Luckily he is befriended by a nice ten-year old boy. Elliott and E.T. have an immediate kinship, and the boy can share the alien’s feelings. E.T. also becomes special friend to Elliott’s older brother and younger sister and the family dog; the children’s recently divorced mother is too distracted to realize that something weird is going on in Elliott’s room. The love blossoms between the kids and E.T., but the fragile creature becomes sickly because he longs to return home.

Overlooking the Elliott/Haba similarities, critics till date speak of Spielberg as someone who “took out a patent on perennial childhood”, about his “kid-centric sentiment”\(^20\), about someone who gave a twist to *The Wizard of Oz* sentiment (three youngsters helping an adult return to his own world and make him realize that “there’s no place like home”). In the meantime the euphoria over his creation of E.T. remains unabated. His two-storey pueblo-style office building at the Universal backlot “is surrounded by a low, earth colored wall marked with a boy on his bike balancing E.T. on the handlebars” and inside, one office wall has “framed cartoons of E.T. from newspapers all over the country”.\(^21\) In another interview given to Gene Siskel on March 22, 1990, Spielberg still thinks that he “was lucky to have been able to be the one to make that movie”:

> The big joy of course, is not so much thinking about “Gee, I made *E.T.*” It’s when someone sees it for the first time, preferably a child, and really has an interesting reaction to it. When I go around beaming with pride is when someone who hasn’t seen *E.T.* before sees it for the first time.\(^22\)

In the same interview he reconfirmed that the film was conceived much earlier and only made much later:

> I pretty much cleaned out my drawers during the decades of the eighties. And everything that I had stored away in the seventies that I hadn’t made yet. *E.T.*, which was a stored away bottom drawer project from the seventies I made in the eighties. I pretty much cleaned out the locker.\(^23\)

Whatever the actual case might be, this tale of unearthly wonders from a child’s point of view or at least from the ‘child within’s’ point of view establishes Steven
Spielberg as a creator of spellbinders par excellence. Though he occasionally manipulates us into shedding tears, the film is genuinely sweet. E.T. is a wonderful creation with universal appeal - kids respond to him with such affection because he truly satisfies their need for Stevenson’s ‘imaginary playmate’; the ideal friend for all kids (especially those who do not have two parents always there) who wished their stuffed animals could hug them back. Adults of course, are also taken with E.T. When he dons a long robe and waddles through the house, he may remind us of our favorite, quirkiest visiting relative. “What binds my films together”, says Spielberg, “is the concept of loneliness and isolation and being pursued by all the forces of character and nature”. He also defines it to be “a happily pacifistic film. I thought the spirit of youth, so to speak, is sort of in every person. Everybody can identify with their own childhood. To have an E.T. in your life just keeps you young all your life. I think you have to believe in something. The director also confirms that he is no longer “curious about what happens next” and would never like to make a sequel to it because “it ended. It was a wonderful love affair, and then it was all over. And then Elliott went back to his life, and E.T. went back to his planet. There’s no going back, there’s nothing more to say. I said it all”. The director’s note of fulfilment remains, of course, in sharp contrast with the feelings of Satyajit Ray for not being able to make The Alien. Not that Ray really lost anything - it was actually a loss for world cinema. Spielberg’s humorous comment expressed in some other occasion, “I think Hollywood will forgive me once I’m 55, I don’t know what they’ll forgive me for, but they’ll forgive when I’m 55”, offers poor consolation to Ray sympathizers.

NOTES


2 Leisurely gossip in a group ranging over every conceivable subject; the group itself.


The three projects that Satyajit Ray wanted to do in Hollywood were *The Mahabharata*, E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*, and *The Alien*, references of which occur several times in his talks and writing.

Surabhi Banerjee narrates a slightly different version. “Ray met him (Arthur C. Clarke) later in London, gave him an idea of the project. Clarke seemed to like it and back home in Colombo he spoke about it to Lester Peries, and to Mike Wilson, an American then residing in Sri Lanka”. Andrew Robinson’s view also is the same.

“Satyajit Ray’s Science Film ‘Avatar’”. *Ascharya*, May 1967. This interview also stated that Arthur C. Clarke would write a story based on this film.

Robinson, p.293.

Quoted in Banerjee, p.202. Through Arthur C. Clarke’s mediation, Ray came to know that after returning from Hollywood, Mike Wilson had shaved his head and gone off to meditate in the jungles of South India. A letter from the ‘shaven-headed monk’ himself also followed. As Ray wrote, “He was relinquishing his rights to the screenplay, although obviously too close to sainthood to spell it out in mundane terms”. Referring to the battle between evil and good in the *Ramayana*, Ray addressed him as ‘Ravana’. See Robinson, p.294.


Quoted in Robinson, p. 294.


In this same monologue Spielberg tells us that his first regular stint at the Universal Studios began when he was just eighteen years old, even before he entered college. “During summer vacation when I was eighteen, I went to visit my uncle’s family in Canoga Park. I wanted to see movies being made, so my cousin dropped me off at the Universal for a tour of the studio…..So every singe day during that summer vacation, I walked through the gate in my suit and hung out with the writers and directors and editors and dubbers……I found an office that was not being used in an old building. I went to a camera store and I bought little titles, plastic letters and words used to do amateur titles for home movies, and I put my name in the building directory: Steven Spielberg, Room 23C. I came in everyday. The people who knew I was squatting thought it was great and supported me”. p.41

This would be around 1965 or 1966. Spielberg’s denial to Arthur C. Clarke that he was only a kid in high school when mimeographed copies of Ray’s script was circulating in Hollywood therefore cannot be accepted wholeheartedly.
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