



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 10. Issue.3. 2023 (July-Sept.)

INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

TRACING FINAL FRONTIERS OF INDIAN SPECULATIVE FICTION IN SATYAJIT RAY'S  
'PROFESSOR SHONKU'

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Article information

Received:12/07/2023

Accepted:19/08/2023

Published online:02/09/2023

doi: [10.33329/ijelr.10.3.102](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.10.3.102)

ABSTRACT

The journey of a protagonist has always been an important motif across various genres of literature. Speculative Fiction, a term coined by famous American author Robert Heinlein, houses several genres like science fiction, fantasy, horror and detective. It often deals with plots that are sketched on the background of a place or world that are non-existent in the real world. It could be an undiscovered planet, a civilization underwater, a society embedded in deep space, a distant galaxy, or altogether in a different dimension. C.S. Lewis' fantasy series *The Chronicles of Narnia* is set in the world of Narnia; Tolkien built Middle Earth; and Rowling conjured an amalgamation of the wizarding world and muggle world. The trilogy of *Dune* by Frank Herbert is set on the barren planet Arrakis, while Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* is set against the backdrop of the Galactic Empire. Satyajit Ray, an acclaimed Indian film director and author, penned several works of speculative fiction in Bangla, where Professor Shonku, the protagonist, embarks upon thrilling quests across various places in Asia, Africa, South America, and Europe. Professor Shonku also visits some places that cannot be traced in the real world. This current paper aims to trace the final frontiers, i.e., unknown and uncharted territories of Indian Speculative Fiction in Satyajit Ray's seven stories about Professor Shonku, where the central character embarks across space and time, beneath the ocean, to different planets, and to some of the clandestine locations that do not exist on the geographical map of the world.

**Keywords:** Speculative Fiction, Journey, Final Frontiers, Indian Science Fiction, Professor Shonku

Speculative Fiction is a fertile bed of imagination which exposes the readers to probable scientific principles, technical evolution of humanity through gadgets, robots or artificial intelligence which is non-existent in the current social as well as historical context. It also extrapolates to imaginary situations and sometimes takes up the current scenarios and thrust them into a distant or past timeline and along with that it provides a tour to some extravagant places which could be at the centre of earth, deep beneath the ocean, an uncharted island, country, unknown planet, galaxy far away or in a territory into the deep space. There have been numerous works in speculative fiction where the plots are set in such outlandish places. Professor Challenger, the protagonist in Arthur Conan Doyle's work travels to the Amazon basin housing dinosaur-like creatures in *The*

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*Lost World* (1912). Ray Bradbury's illustrious episodic novel *The Martian Chronicles* (1950) centres on an altogether different planet Mars. Satyajit Ray too created a series of speculative fiction stories (thirty eight to be specific). The research article will explore six speculative fiction stories where the distinguished scientist Professor Trilokeshwar Shonku of Giridih, India journeys to the extreme bound of human thought.

"**The Diary of the Space Traveller**" (1961) published in Sandesh marked the advent of Professor Shonku in the realm of Bengali and Indian Speculative Fiction. The narrative archives the groundwork of the immensely gifted scientist Professor Trilokeshwar Shonku getting ready for his interplanetary travel to Mars. This narration introduces the characters like Prahlad (the servant), Newton (Shonku's beloved pet cat) and his long time neighbour Avinash Babu who all became the part of many upcoming science fiction short stories. Shonku builds a rocket and a robot named Bidhushekhar for his journey to the red planet. It is filled with thrilling adventures of Shonku, Bidhushekhar, Prahlad and his cat Newton on the soil of Mars, where they encounter the violent group of Martians. Satyajit Ray very authentically records the description of the alien race; here is an extract about the group of Martians, where Shonku provides a physical description of the aliens:

The creature that was chasing him was not human, nor an animal or a fish. Yet it had something in common with all three. It was about four feet high. It had legs and feet, but instead of arms, there were huge fins, like fish. Its head was very big, in the centre of which was a single, large green eye. The mouth was gaping wide, but there were no teeth. Its whole body was covered by fish scales, glistening in the sun. (*The Diary of a Space Traveller and Other Stories*: 19)

The later part deals with their subsequent escape from Mars and eventually landing upon an unknown planet known as Tara, located at some place on the Milky Way. The Martians were violent and hostile towards the earthly human while the dwellers of Tara were friendly and hospitable towards them.

Space travel is also an important concept in speculative fiction where the protagonist travels to other planets, moon in the galaxy or simply to space. Several famous science fictions have been composed around the concept of space travel like Heinlein's *The Man Who Sold the Moon* (1950), Arthur C Clarke's *Prelude to Space* (1951), and *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1979) by Douglas Adams etc.

In "**Professor Shonku and the Radiant Fish**", Professor Shonku comes across an article on *The Statesman* regarding the advent of peculiar fish across Bay of Bengal across Gopalpur Coast. Shonku along with his long time neighbor Avinash Babu, his Japanese acquaintances Hamkura, Tanaka and his beloved pet Newton dived into the unknown depth of the Bay of Bengal in order to solve the mystery regarding the origin of radiant fishes which have caused several deaths near the coastal areas near Rangoon and other areas adjacent to the Bay of Bengal. This science fiction contains a vivid account of the marine life. Satyajit Ray excites the reader with a rich description of various flora and fauna of the oceanic world. The narrative also records the excitement among the submarine crew upon seeing the remains of historical vessels lying on the ocean bed. Avinash Babu with his dimwitted dialogues provided comical outburst throughout the narration. The following exchange of words in the above-mentioned science fiction between Shonku and Avinash Babu provides some information about his vague idea regarding the marine world:

Avinash Babu refused to believe that they were also called 'fish'. 'How can they be fish?' he wanted to know. 'They haven't got tails, scales on their bodies or even fins. You expect me to believe everything you tell me?' (*The Unicorn Expedition and Other Stories*: 41)

It basically dwells upon two speculative fiction themes like underwater voyages and contact with stranded alien vessels. Underwater voyages have been successfully dealt with by Jules Verne, in his science fiction novel *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870), where the leading characters dive deep into the ocean with the help of Captain Nemo's futuristic submarine Nautilus. C.S Lewis, the famous author of the fantasy series *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-56) also dealt with an underwater expedition in the short story "The Voyage of the Dawn Treader" (1952), where the sea sailors encountered the ferocious sea serpent and other friendly creatures like dolphins, mermaids etc.

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It often happens that aliens visit human earth and they get stranded on this earth owing to some technical faults in their alien spaceships. The radiant fishes are basically alien fishes that were stranded as their vessel was facing technical faults and by accident, they turned hostile towards the human race owing to their lack of knowledge about the earthlings. Similar concepts have been dealt with in Steven Spielberg's Hollywood flick *E.T* (1982) where the protagonist tries to help a stranded alien getting back to his spaceship. *The Possessed* (1953) written by

Arthur.C.Clarke deals with a stranded alien spaceship in the pre-human world, where the alien parasites were looking for a suitable host in order to survive.

**"The Mystery of Munroe Island"** deals with another adventure of Professor Shonku to an unknown island which has been named after a seventeenth-century physicist Dr. Munroe. Professor Shonku leads a group of scientists from five different nations to a particular island shrouded somewhere on the Atlantic Ocean, on a sea vessel named Sumacraft, created by the Japanese scientist Hidechi Suma. The crew received an antique letter inside a bottle written by Dr. Munroe which speaks about an incredible fruit. The team was in search of such amazing fruit. The narrative speaks about the voyage and their subsequent discovery of the island. Shonku with his machine Telecardioscope discovered the presence of a colossal animal on the island. Professor and his team discovered the blue coloured fruit which was mentioned in Dr. Munroe's letter. Professor Shonku brought a few samples in order to analyze the nutrients of the fruit. One of the characters fell ill on the island and Professor offered his medicine 'Miracurool' but the patient consumed the blue fruit which resembled the structure of Miracurool. It led to the disappearance of the fever but he was stimulated with excessive appetite. Later on, the group discovered the remains, treasure of seventeenth-century pirates which included looted items like swords, ornaments and gold coins of the seventeenth century. The story mentions Munroe's diary which was discovered on the island which narrates the horrific tale of the pirates who consumed that particular fruit in order to get rid of ailments and in turn got affected by eternal hunger. When the food got exhausted, they turned cannibal and the leader of the pirate's Black Hole Brandon consumed all of his crew members in order to ease his demonic hunger. Dr.Munroe speaks about the negative aspect of the fruit and says that the fruit is a curse as it challenges the mortality of men and men won't die unless he is a victim of external injury. Brandon was still alive after four hundred years when Shonku and his team arrived at that island. He attacked the team but Shonku fired his 'Annihilin gun' in order to defend themselves and thus getting rid of the colossal criminal. Shonku once leads the pack of international expeditors and saves them all from the life threatening danger.

The science fiction covers issues like the natural cycle of life and death, buried treasure of pirates and daring voyages to unknown islands. In Jules Verne's novel *The Mysterious Island* (1871), a group of civil war prisoners escapes the prisons and travels by a hot air balloon to a mysterious island in the Pacific Ocean.

**"Professor Shonku and the Mysterious Island"** is one of the bizarre works of the Professor Shonku series, where the protagonist along with his neighbor, Avinash Babu, flies off to a secretive island which never existed on the World Atlas until then. Shonku created an indigenous airplane known as 'Shanko plane' whose anti-gravity metal known as Shankovite was produced in his own laboratory at Giridih. The storyline focuses on the strange visions experienced by Shonku in his sleep and the desire to visit that mystical island was so strong that he actually visited the island with his invented food pill known as Botica Indica, thirst quenching pill, tips and coffee pills with stock that would last for sixty days. They landed upon a bizarre island known as Florona situated on the Pacific Ocean near the Philippines, whose texture consisted of red earth and blue gravel. Shonku was drawn to the beauty of the island. And he was not an exception; apart from the protagonist seven other world renowned scientists and intellectuals were also present on that island. These seven scientists were missing for the time after they attended one conference for intellectuals and scholars in Manila, Philippines. Professor Shonku along with Avinash Babu discovered their existence on that remote island. They were British physicist Professor Sidney Hamlyn, Japanese philosopher Hamuchi Hamada, Italian mathematician Umberto Carboni, German biochemist Dr. Adolf Broden, Swedish geologist Oslen Borg, French psychologist Henri Vilma and the Russian linguist Vladimir Tushenko.

All these men were acting in one of the most inexplicable ways, all the marks of intelligence and quick wit were replaced by the childlike ignorance and to be more specific they were acting dumb. Some of them were giggling like a child, while others were crawling like tiny tots. Some of them were sleeping like a peaceful child while others were reciting nursery rhymes. The island boasted some exotic flora, which were never seen before by Professor Shonku and it had a particular aura which was hallucinating at times. Professor Shonku also started behaving like a child and started crawling towards one of the huge exotic flowers over there and their color suddenly changed from gray to yellowish. After that incident, even Shonku started behaving strangely and uttered childish gibberish like Tiddlywinks. Later on, it was revealed that these plants used to thrive on the knowledge and intelligence of people. Thus, they used to lure all the famous men of science, language and other fields in their dreams. These plants used to instigate such a passion to visit this alien island that those men actually visited the island in order to check the authenticity of their dreams. The following line from "Professor Shonku and The Mysterious Island" supports this argument:

The food for the trees and plants on the island called Florona, their means of survival, was the knowledge stored in a human brain. Not only that, if these plants got sufficiently hungry, they had the power to attract people with sharp brains and high level of intelligence to the island. All floras in this world receive nourishment from light, air and the earth. None of these natural elements were enough to keep those extraordinary plants alive. Their faded, lifeless forms that we saw on the eastern side of the island were clear evidence of this fact. (*The Unicorn Expedition and Other Stories*: 127)

However, Avinash Babu helps Shonku to get back to his home and the rest of the narrative follows the return of Shonku to his state of normalcy. The narration reminds us about one of the most celebrated poems of Alfred Lord Tennyson "The Lotos-Eaters"(1832), where Ulysses along with a group of sailors enters into an altered state of mind after consuming Lotos fruits in a mysterious island. They also become isolated from their purpose of life and spend the entire time in a drowsy state of mind and the hallucination was so intense that the sailors were totally detached from the worldly affairs and did not wish to return from Lotos Island. The last few lines from "The Lotos-Eaters" echo the same thought:

Then someone said, "We will return no more";  
And all at once they sang, "Our island home  
Is far beyond the wave; we will no longer roam." ("The Lotos-Eaters")

Even Shonku and other enchanted souls were deeply attracted towards the floras of the Florona Island and after being the food of the plants; they lost their conscious mind and returned to the state of altered reality where they acted like jejune individuals.

In the space-themed speculative fiction "**Shonku and the UFO**", Shonku along with Nakur Chandra Biswas, Krole, Saunders and the Chinese archaeologist Dr Sheng defeats an evil scientist Dr Carboni of Milan. Dr. Carboni occupies a spaceship of friendly aliens who were unfortunately killed by the earth borne virus and uses their spaceship to destroy all the great architecture of the civilized world like Pantheon, Eiffel Tower and St. Paul's Cathedral. Shonku along with his group were immobilized inside the spaceship and with the unique ability of Nakur Babu, they were able to vanish the Taj Mahal momentarily and thus save the destruction of the same. Satyajit Ray showcased the gracious relation between an alien race and mankind, professional rivalry between two scientists, the wounded ego of a scientist and his insanity regarding the destruction and the beauty of human creations. In one of the incidents, Dr. Carboni accuses Shonku of taking all the credits on a particular research area and also expressed his hatred like a colonizer over a person belonging to the colonized country.

Dr. Carboni expresses his concern regarding the benefit of doubt. He blames the fact that Shoku being a citizen of a poor country like India would have drawn more sympathetic support than Carboni himself. His statement exposes the psychological superiority of a white man over a brown man. Men like Carboni still considered India, a backward nation and incapable of producing scholars in the field of science. He was also jealous of the fact that an oriental scientist was gaining more accolades for his work than an occidental man like himself. The following lines from the "Shonku and the UFO" support the above comment:

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It wouldn't have gone down well. I would have been accused of plagiarising your work. Your international reputation, your fame plus your good luck would have favoured you. The fact that your own country is poor and backwards would have attracted more support and sympathy. Nobody knows me here. Why should they believe my word? (*The Diary of a Space Traveller and Other Stories*: 304)

**"Prophecy of Don Christboldi"** traces the journey of Shonku along with his group to a mysterious island on Pacific Island on the basis of an ancient prophecy. This island was the home of autoplasm, a special type of biological species with a high level of intellect. Autoplasm were created naturally or to be more specifically by themselves as the name suggests through their will power. The shapeshifter autoplasm possessed advanced scientific and technological knowledge and they could create gold by artificial means. Shonku helps them with their epidemic problem by providing a stock of his wonder drug Miracurool. Out of their gratitude towards Shonku's aid, they agreed to display their advanced knowledge in front of the scientific world. However, the representative of the autoplasm became the victim of human greed and it was Professor Shonku who ultimately liberated the autoplasm from the clutches of the evil scientist Sabatini. Once again Shonku essayed the role of a good Samaritan and freed the victim from unending human greed and capitalism. Shonku was drawn towards the advanced state of the autoplasm and their surroundings and he concluded that the human is best as they can feel the warmth, love, passion, pain and other ranges of emotions which were absent in the highly advanced species like autoplasm and human are happier with the natural elements of the earth. While Shonku's pacifist mindset was visible in his response towards the whole incident, it also exposed the parable of the colonial mindset, where the white man wants to possess everything that is valuable, rare and unique. The colonial attitude doesn't care for the sensitive issues like emotion and honor but only looks for authoritative and commercial benefits. Science fiction has drawn inspiration from the world-famous seer of France, Michel de Nostredame's work *The Prophecies* (1555) which predicted some of the greatest events of the future earth.

In **"Dr Rondi's Time Machine"**, Satyajit Ray narrates the story of Professor Shonku experiencing an unforgettable ride through one of the most celebrated aspects of speculative fiction, the Time Machine. Professor Shonku provides the reader with a description of the Time Machine. The shape was almost that of a room with a two feet high platform at the base. The machine housed a plastic chamber at the center, where the time travelers are supposed to occupy a seat, engage the necessary switches and enjoy the time travel. The Time traveler could be in the past or in the future with few moments. In the first half of the narrative, it is revealed three scientists of the world were working simultaneously to build a Time Machine, Shonku being the one and while the other two were Germany's Claiber and Italy's Rondi. Shonku presented a scientific paper on his time machine which was well received at the world stage; however, Shonku couldn't complete his project owing to limited infrastructure and resources. Claiber made some significant progress; however, his untimely death prevented the further progress of the project. Dr Rondi was successful in creating the Time Machine and he invited Shonku to witness the Time Machine.

In the meantime, the highly talented person Nakur Chandra visited Shonku to warn about a great danger which might be fatal to the core. In spite of the warnings, Shonku visited Rondi in Florence, Italy. Shonku enjoyed the Time Travel when he visited a veterinary hospital during the rule of Emperor Asoka in India and later on paid a visit to the two-thousand-year-old Babylon City through Dr Rondi's Time Machine. However, he decided to travel to the fateful night when Claiber of Germany was murdered and to his horror it was revealed that Dr Rondi was the assassin of the German scientist. Shonku understood that Rondi wanted to be the exclusive scientist with a patent on Time Machine and that is why he was eliminating his competitors. Dr Rondi tried to wipe out Shonku by providing him with poison. However, Shonku's friend Crole along with Rondi's assistant alarmed the Police and nabbed the murderer. Shonku regained his health by consuming his wonder drug Miracurool.

The celebrated theme of Time Travel involves the protagonist traveling through the time zones and ultimately landing upon distant past or distant future. Time travel is achieved through an apparatus called Time Machine. Sometimes it is accomplished through the help of God or Evil and other means like supernatural power.

For example, in the highly acclaimed science fiction novel *The Time Machine*, H. G Wells provides a highly detailed account of the time traveler. His exploits through the time travel form the main crux of the story:

We are always getting away from the present moment. Our mental existence, which are immaterial and have no dimensions, are passing along the Time-Dimension with a uniform velocity from the cradle to the grave.(9)

There are other instances also where the protagonist travels to the distant past and meets up with the historical character and records their response. In Christopher Marlowe's play *Doctor Faustus* (1592), the hero travels back to the ancient world of Troy (as a result of his pact with the devil, Mephistopheles) and meets up with the evergreen beauty Helen. Here are the following lines from the drama *Doctor Faustus* to support the claim regarding Faustus' voyage to the court of Troy and relishing the maddening beauty of Iliad's femme fatale character Helen:

Was this the face that launch'd a thousand ships,  
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?  
Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss.  
Her lips suck forth my soul: see where it flies!  
Come, Helen, come, give me my soul again.  
Here will I dwell, for heaven is in these lips,  
And all is dross that is not Helena. (162)

*Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* (2016) centers around the concept of time travel. The popular author J.K Rowling came up with an interesting device known as Time-Turner.

Time-Turner is a magical device which could be used to travel through time. Time-Turner could be used to turn time according to one's need. The plot line revolves around locating this Time-Turner device hidden inside the highly guarded Ministry of Magic's office. The main protagonist, Albus Severus Potter along with his friend Scorpius Malfoy begins their quest to detect the location of time turner which would lead them to travel in the past and prevent a horrifying murder of an innocent wizard to take place.

## Conclusion

Satyajit Ray places his speculative fiction hero Professor Trilokeshwar Shonku across a variety of settings, in a known planet of Akash Ganga, Mars and an unknown planet, Tafa in the introductory story of the Shonku series. Shonku dives into the deep abyss of the sea water, where no one has dived before and encounters a group of luminescent alien fishes. The protagonist also charts to a few unknown islands, Munroe or Island of Dreams and obviously back and forth through time.

This paper discussed the short stories where Shonku has traveled to space, beneath the water, on air and to some remote locations on the earth. The last part of the paper analyzes the events where Shonku travels through time. These outlandish places portrayed in six stories might be fantastic but it does reflect the reality of the world. It acted as the fertile bed for the growth of novum in story arc. These extreme locations not only provided a setting for the plotlines but it also acted as method for projecting the mysterious peril and the heroism of the protagonist in dealing with baffling threats in strange territories thus providing an elevating experience for the readers. The final frontiers manifested the ultimate test of Shonku's ability to deal with hostile situations at a given place at any time, like an Oriental wise monk who is calm, composed and have the aptitude to tackle life threatening situations.

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