



The Messiah of Ogd: An Ode to Nonsense

Christie Rachel Saji

Abstract

Sometimes it takes nonsense to understand sense. And sometimes, it takes a child and his/her nonsensical question for the whole sense of the world to collapse. This paper is an attempt to study Anushka Ravishankar's nonsensical children's novel *Ogd*. Ravishankar through her novel, deconstructs religion, science, logic and language; entities looked upon as the final end of meaning. And in doing so, she sheds light on the process of meaning-making. Using Edward Lear's Limericks and Lewis Carroll's novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the paper attempts to understand the genre of nonsense in its act of deconstruction. And the paper tries to analyse the novel through the lens of what has been understood from Lear's and Carroll's works of nonsense. Using some of Derrida's ideas, the paper attempts to understand Ravishankar's novel in detail.

Keywords: Nonsense, Parody, Deconstruction, Logocentrism, Différance.

The word 'nonsense' conjures up a world where language and its semantic process fails. It unfolds a pre-language infancy that eludes order and embraces chaos. But this chaos of meaninglessness threatens any adult who has lived his life in the world of sense. For it deconstructs all that they have learned, questions the distinctions between right and wrong and shakes up foundations. But for a child, who is still in the threshold, awaiting adulthood, nonsense is fun. The child unlike the adult understands that he/she is playing with lawlessness and thus, adapts. And in the process, makes the threat of the chaos into a fun adventure. It is this combination of nonsense, children and deconstruction, that the paper tries to decode using Anushka Ravishankar's *Ogd*.

Though the genre plays with meaninglessness, it too cannot exist without the apparel of sense. That is even nonsense must make sense at some level. According to Michael Heyman, the genre of nonsense attempts for a balance between sense and nonsense. While nonsense disrupts the process of meaning-making and logic, the genre of 'nonsense' be it a limerick or a novel, is bound by rigid structures of form, giving it an overall feel of sense. Lear's limericks are a good example. The five-line limericks defy all attempts at logic, but they adhere to a strict form and rhyme (2007, p. xxiv). For example:

There was an Old Man in a tree,
Who was horribly bored by a Bee;
When they said, 'Does it buzz?'
He replied, 'Yes, it does!'

‘It’s a regular brute of a Bee!’

And this adherence to a strict form, controls the exuberance of ‘nonsense’. For, in the genre of nonsense, along with a break in meaning-making, the unity of body, space and time also crumbles down. And this destruction of body and all units of fixity, renders the text threatening and violent.

This is especially evident in the children’s fiction *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll. The dream world plays with the hitherto certainties that Alice has learned. The world undermines Alice’s growth and the steps she took in crossing the threshold from childhood and growing up. In the Wonderland, Alice realises that, time, as she understands, does not exist; for there, the time is a “he” who changes according to his whims and fancies. Space too does not operate the way she knows. And even her own body, with its multiple growth spurts, makes her question her sense of self. As she begins her adventures in the Wonderland, she finds herself shrinking and then growing taller, with no sight of her own toes. These metamorphoses initially rattle Alice and she sits and cries. But slowly she tries to figure out the situation and starts to believe that she might have become someone else, Ada or Mabel, girls her age in the real world. Continuing from this confusion, she finds it difficult to answer the caterpillar’s simple question ‘who are you?’. And when the pigeon accuses Alice of wanting to steal her eggs and calls her a serpent, Alice doubts whether she is indeed a serpent and not a child. These moments of self-doubt, though presented funnily from the mouth of a young girl, are confounding questions to an adult. This is the violence of the text. For it questions the very existence of being. The violence of nonsense, not that obvious in a children’s novel becomes apparent and scary in an adult novel. Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, also talks about a man who turns into an insect. But his novel ends with Gregor Samsa, the protagonist’s death. The text’s initial absurdity and light tone, which gets serious with each passing page, can only end with the sensible conclusion of his death. A man whose existence becomes senseless has to die for the order of the society and the world to return.

Similarly, the Wonderland too manifests other instances of violence. The sudden body metamorphoses (of the Cheshire cat and Alice herself), anomalies, substitutions (like when the baby is actually a pig), queen’s cries of execution, the absurdity of the games and the trial and the disjunction between the signifier and the signified in the language used by the Wonderland beings.

This also occurs in Lear’s verses. His characters have idiosyncratic body differences or anomalies; like long nose, long beard, the chin shaped like a pin, and so on. Though Lear’s verses make light of situations and traits uncontrollable and different, the sensible lives of his characters are in tatters. Or one can say, nonsense in a way gives meaning to them. Where sense fails nonsense wins. But many Lear’s verses too, end in death by mob violence or body dismemberment. In Lear’s presentation, the violence of the acts is made less by the strict sensical rhyme and format. But it is still there. As John Rieder writes; “Time is the partner of poetic form, and will bring about a kind of closure even where meaning remains open” (1998, p. 59). And similarly, the presence of made-up words too helps in situating the nonsense verse in a space different from our world, rendering it distant and harmless. Carroll too dissipates the threat of nonsense, by encasing Wonderland in a dream, making a child its protagonist, and animals and inanimate objects as its other characters.

There are multiple debates on the function of ‘nonsense’. Critics opine that in case of children, the genre of nonsense gives them a chance to challenge the authority of adults, social customs and rituals. ‘Nonsense’ places adults in situations where they have no control. Take the case of this Lear’s verse. It makes fun of a probable situation that can inconvenience an adult logical man:

There was an Old Man who supposed,

That the street door was partially closed;
But some very large rats,
Ate his coats and his hats,
While that futile old gentleman dozed.

The 'Nonsense' also challenges the social mores of behaviour. As in the Wonderland, where Alice's sense of doing things is disrupted and ridiculed. And the fun of 'nonsense' comes from this breakdown of social rules and normalcy as the society dictates it. Aldous Huxley describes Lear's limericks "as a sort of assertion of freedom..." from "common sense, legality and the duller virtues generally" (qtd. in Orwell, 1945). Many critics also connect 'nonsense' and parody. The latter, not as a direct attack on a text or an author, but as an attack on sense in general (Eliot, 1971, p. 29). Rieder (1998) writes; "Lear's approach to these [social] conventions are "meta-cultural", in that it manipulates and explores the limits of social codes (Boussac)" (p. 51). Hence, Anushka Ravishankar says, "This is the quintessential nature of nonsense - the ability to be nothing and something at the same time" (2007, p. liii).

Writers have also noted a connection between religion, 'nonsense' and fantasy. Just as fantasy works rely on the actualisation of impossibilities, 'nonsense' too sells the readers impossibility. And so does religion. G. K. Chesterton (1901) writes: "Religion has for centuries been trying to make men exult in the "wonders" of creation, but it has forgotten that a thing cannot be completely wonderful so long as it remains sensible". Similarly, Kevin Shortleeve (2005) too traces the history of 'nonsense' to the carnivals where rituals, beliefs and customs were inverted, lampooned and parodied. Thus, 'nonsense' has a closer affinity to religion; with a granted position to undermine religious ideas with impunity from censorship.

The novel *Ogd* begins with a nuclear holocaust which sets the stage for a nonsensical world where the binaries of inside and outside are broken down. Hence, the kingdom of Ogd, no longer has an inside or outside. And the author wittily observes that Xenophobia is eliminated as "all Ogdians" are "non- Ogdians" (Ravishankar, 2020, p. 5). It is to this space that a Messiah is born. A Messiah with her foot in the mouth. A Messiah resembling the Ouroboros, the snake that eats its own tail, symbolising continuity, and a lack of beginning and end. From the get go, the author introduces the readers to a world where space, time, beginning, end, inside and outside are compromised. Ogd has no centre and Ogd has no margins. Initially, this leads to a mass confusion in Ogd, with asylums cropping up for the ones confounded by the new spatiality. By questioning the notion of sanity in the beginning itself, the book foreshadows its nonsensical nature.

The logocentrism of traditional religions are rooted in the figure of a male Messiah or a saviour, born on the earth for its redemption. And religions like Christianity intrinsically ties the Messiah with the Word which is believed to predate the earth and the humans. Thus, both the Word and God have become one and the centre from which all meanings emanate. It is this privileging of the centre that critics like Derrida demolished. And Ravishankar's *Ogd* can be seen as a definitive piece that represents Derrida's deconstruction of logocentrism. She questions the 'logos' of masculinity, language and God through the genre of nonsense. Her Messiah is a woman. A girl who eats her toenails.

Ravishankar's work can be read as a parody of established religious ideas. By creating a nonsensical affinity with the religions in question, she self-reflexively makes the readers laugh at many practices and rituals of their daily life done in utmost seriousness. Many utterances of the Messiah are nonsensical, yet it is not devoid of sense. That is the absurdity of the figure of Messiah.

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The work lampoons the Messiah and the people who blindly follow her teachings without the sense to think twice about it. For instance, the school of Ogd changes its logo to the great words of Messiah- “Everything that is not true is not false” (2020, p. 24). But this does not lead to children and teachers improving their thinking skills and philosophical knowledge. Rather the students and teachers get confused about how to answer true or false questions in exams. And the school naturally has problems with the Messiah’s way of putting her foot in the mouth. So, they talk to her about its practical difficulties. But she answers that “she could not compromise on her lofty foot-in-the-mouth principles merely on account of inconvenient ergonomics” (p. 22). The sense of practicality is sacrificed in the loftiness of nonsense. Similarly, on hearing about the death of countless people in a war that started because of her ideas, Messiah just muses on the lack of difference between life and death (p. 59). “Nonsense, according to Stewart, is language that resists contextualisation, so that it refers to “nothing” instead of the world’s common sense designation” (qtd. in Rieder 1998, p. 49) Thus, Ravishankar through the logocentric figure of the Messiah, demonstrates the interchangeability between sense and nonsense. Or in Heyman’s words “nonsense [that] usually emerges from an excess of sense rather than a lack of it...” (2007, p. xxiv).

Rieder (1998) mentions that nonsense works “consistently address some of the most basic social conventions with which children struggle, such as those governing eating, dressing, grooming and talking” (p. 51). In *Ogd* too, Ravishankar addresses the activities of eating, sitting, learning, etc. The Messiah advocates eating toenails. And she won’t sit like other students in benches because her feet are in her mouth. And the Messiah’s way of doing things are exactly what parents ask their children not to do. Eating toenails is unhygienic, so is putting your feet in your mouth. But, the nonsensical world of Ogd abounds with these absurd and unhygienic practices. And these are practiced in all seriousness. And this child Messiah is not alone in her actions. The entire adult world too follows her blindly. In essence, the novel points towards the arbitrariness of customs and practices in general.

The novel also embodies the violence of senselessness. A war starts out because of the Messiah’s philosophy. But like in the other nonsense works, the destruction and threat are glossed over by the Messiah’s seeming indifference to life and death. Human life and death become buried in her exuberant philosophy which abounds with sense, but is complete nonsense in reality.

The religious figureheads of the real world are also parodied. The Messiah laments that no one wants to kill, defy or even hurt her. For, when the King of Ogd summons the Messiah, she expects a confrontation. But the only problems that the king finds with her are her hairstyle and her toenail biting habit. But these she refuses to change as these are part of who she is. And the king just invites her to be his queen if she decides to change her hairstyle, pushing the Messiah into paranoia, and she laments, “No one’s out to get me...” (Ravishankar, 2020, p. 50).

The work also plays with ideas of science. Fire, Kinetic Energy, Momentum, are all animated beings in constant conversation with the Messiah. And she discusses scientific facts to nonsensical dimensions. Here the Messiah weaves the nonsense using the metaphoric language and its multiple meanings, played along with the weighty scientific ideas. This is exemplified in the weakness of energy with the mass of the universe increasing due to population growth, and the fire who was chided for “licking”. Thus, all the absolute entities, be it science, language or God, are demolished.

The novel uses symbols to get across its nonsensical philosophy. A dominant symbol which recurs throughout is that of a circle. From the Messiah who is born with her foot in the mouth, the Mobius strip, the Klein bottle, the circular arguments she uses, all are its manifold representations. All of them point to a continuous deference of an ending, and for that matter even a beginning. No one can reach an absolute end, a definitive meaning, a centre or a base to

begin their understanding. As Messiah herself remarks, “the without is the same as the within” (2020, p. 60). All binary pairs move in an endless circle of deferring meaning. And it is this process of eternal deferring or infinity that constitutes the nonsense of *Ogd*. E.g., the Messiah talks about the “necessity of not learning” as follows; “

For learning begets forgetting, and not learning is not forgetting, she lectured. What is not learned is not forgotten, what is not forgotten is remembered, what is remembered is learnt. What is learnt is forgotten. What is forgotten is not learnt. What is ... (p. 42)

Thus, the circularity of her arguments creates nonsense. But in *Ogd*, this circularity and deference lead to knowledge as people gain enlightenment when they put their feet in their mouths.

In *Ogd*, language becomes “less a signifier and more ... a raw material” (Heyman 2007, p. xxvii). Here, Derridean concept of “différance” becomes explicit. In the Derridean philosophy, “the differential play (jeu) of language may produce the “effects” of decidable meanings in an utterance or text but ... since the preferred significance [meaning] can never come to rest in an actual “presence”- or in a language independent reality Derrida calls a transcendental signified - its determinate specification is deferred from one linguistic interpretation to another in a movement or “play”...” (Abrams, Harpham, 2015, pp. 81-82). That is, for Derrida, meaning which manifests as a trace is constantly procrastinated from reaching its end or “presence”, in an eternal play of differences. Derrida writes “The trace is in fact the absolute origin of sense in general which amounts to saying once again that there is no absolute origin of sense in general” (1997, p. 65). Works of ‘nonsense’ exemplify this eternal play and the disjunction between the signifier and the signified. Thus, in Ravishankar’s novel, the difference of the signifiers is exploited for a nonsensical meaning-making process which is eternally deferred from sense. For instance, Messiah substitutes the word “pebbles” for “pearls” of wisdom. Similarly, she becomes hungry learning computer science with its “APPLE” and “POPCORN”. And she doodles the “elefront” and eleback” of an elephant. Thus, the work teases the conventions of language like metaphors, homonyms, difference, etc. It shows the artificiality of the bond between the signifier and the signified. Hence, the ‘natural’ ‘God-given language’ becomes a tool for fun and parody. And the Messiah’s lofty philosophy is nothing but the deference or the circularity of meaning. As she explains “One eats toenails so that the toenails grow and one can eat them” and it is referred in the book as her philosophy of “infinite recursiveness” (Ravishankar, 2020, p. 52).

It is also noticed that the Messiah neither speaks well nor writes. She doodles or uses ghost writers: be it her former critic or a small child. That is, all her speeches are scripted. Thus, Word does not originate from her. There is no centre. And her doodles are interesting in that many of them literalise the metaphoric language. Also, she coins nonsensical words, like in the blurb of her book, which reads: “The Floomy Book of Gloolistic Doodles”. And when asked about its meaning, she replies:

It isn’t on Earth ... it is a concept from Bliffol, an acutely warped spacetime which is about seventeen dimensions away from the earth.

Bliffolan sense, she told the publisher, is unearthly nonsense. (33-34)

Thus, the work even parodies itself. Hence, it can be said that by playing with the meaning-making process itself and making it the essence of her novel, Ravishankar deconstructs language and religion simultaneously in the figure of the Messiah.

But nonsense cannot last for ever. It must end. And for an end, sense must resume. Be it for Alice who has to wake from her dream or the Messiah who decides to marry the king, who she wanted to defy. The world of Wonderland crumbles down when Alice begins questioning its absurdity. The moment Alice points out to the king and the Red Queen that they

are nothing but cards, inanimate beings; the moment logic enters the dream world, Alice wakes up. The children, be it Alice or the Messiah, takes a conscious decision to exit the nonsense. And in the process, they use their adult world logic. Thus, even nonsensical works for its closure has to embrace sense. Be it Gregor Samsa who has to die to bring back the order, or Alice who has to wake up or Messiah who decides to marry, the threat and violence of nonsense has to be controlled. And it is sense that brings closure in the end.

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Bio-note

The author of the paper is Christie Rachel Saji. She is a Research scholar from English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU), Hyderabad, India, doing her research on 'childhood innocence' under the guidance of Professor N. Ramadevi. She has done her Masters in English from Hyderabad Central University, India.

Email id. christiesusansaji@gmail.com

