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Metaphor of 'Bharat' in Kaveri Nambisan's Popular Novel *The Truth (almost) About Bharat*

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Abstract:

During the last quarter of the 20th century, India underwent many changes. These changes are exhibited in popular novel of Kaveri Bhatt Nambisan's *The Truth (almost) about Bharat*. The novel is narrated by Bharat, a nineteen year old student of a private medical college. The novel not only exhibits the journey of Bharat, the character against the dimensions - social, cultural, political and economic problems of Bharat- India dimensions of our country. The paper attempts to show the narrative and thematic implication of metaphor 'Bharat' within its cultural dynamics. Earlier he was living in urban setup, leading a carefree life. Kaveri Nambisan brings Bharat, an urban boy to rural set up, so that he could understand the real Bharat (as country). This works as a metaphor of 'Bharat' in terms of bringing the two dimensions of nation together- India (urban), influenced by industrial ethos and Bharat (rural), influenced by agrarian ethos. The paper also aims to study the dynamics of metaphor 'Bharat' by locating it in the mechanics of 'popular novel'.

Keywords: Popular culture, popular novel, Industrial society values, agrarian society values.

I

In the last quarter of the 20th century, India had prepared itself to interact with the world which was already in the process of integrating with the globalized world. Problems of illiteracy, poor health and sanitary conditions, caste and class divide, overpopulation and unemployment, to name a few, persisted though digital technology backed telecommunication system, increasing reach of television and capital driven consumerist culture had started setting in. The bigger size of the anglicized educated middle class had started creating greater scope for the consumption of literary works in English language. Cinema and T.V. in Hindi, regional languages of India and foreign languages in twenty-four hour telecast through cable networks also started creating patterns of popular culture which could always be supplemented by popular writings. Transformation of job market created a space for professional degrees and study programs in engineering, technology, computer

science, management and media studies. Since government was short of funds for education, the private players started filling the gaps. Young students studying in these institutions with their starry eyes fixed on positions in the corporate world started looking at CEOs as their ideals. This change in ideals was reflective of monumental cultural shifts affected for/by the younger generation who were growing up in ways which were simultaneously Indian ways of life and international ways of life. A larger number of people had started recognizing the marked difference between the two sides of the country — India and Bharat. India increasingly came to refer to the professionally qualified Anglicized urbanized people who controlled the modern economic structures and whose behaviour displayed a high level of Euro-American cultural traits and materialistic values. The nomenclature 'India' in this sense remains tenable today as the population of this category is increasing with the increase in the technically and professionally qualified younger generation which also becomes an addition to the category *India*. The scope and contribution to the revenue by service sector is dominated by people with new technologies and new specializations. This 'New India' by and large subscribes to the values of Industrialised society. On the contrary, a significant chunk of population remains caught in superstitions, poor education and health, practicing values of Agrarian society tinged with caste consciousness. These people live in villages, towns, small cities and on the outskirts/slums of big cities. No doubt, they have a great role in elections but largely remain absent in policy making bodies and policy executing structures. The term *Bharat* increasingly came to refer to these people of the hinterland, most of them poor with lower educational standards and whose behavior was still guided by traditional Indian cultural patterns and who practiced values belonging to the feudal- agrarian past. But more and more people from the hinterland aspired to and were getting opportunities through technical and professional education to join the 'Indian class'. In short, the country was ready for the consumption of light reading in English language where their life occupies literary space, that is popular fiction and genre fiction, which legitimizes, validates and endorses the patterns and values of popular culture. According to *Oxford Dictionary of Media and Communication*, Popular culture (pop culture) is defined as:

"The everyday life and/or arts and artefacts of 'the people' within a society. The practices and artefacts seen as reflecting tastes and values of 'ordinary people' (as opposed to minority tastes of elite or high culture)." (327)

Another term is 'mass culture'. Mass culture refers to :

"Cultural products that are mass produced and for mass audiences. Examples include mass media entertainments- films, television programmes, popular books, newspapers, magazines, popular music, leisure goods, household items, clothing and mechanically-reproduced art." (256)

Sometimes the term 'mass culture' is synonymously used with 'popular culture', 'mass society' or 'the culture of mass society'. As a derogatory term, 'mass society' is also associated with the degradation of cultural forms. Popular culture can be equated with commercial success. These cultural products are often dismissed as 'mere entertainment'. The media industries however, argue that they deliver 'what public wants'. Critics of the subversive audience approach to popular culture dismiss it as culture populism. However,

popular culture clearly plays an important role in relation to development of personal identity among adolescents.

Kaveri Nambisan's *The Truth (almost) About Bharat* (1991) can broadly be categorized as a popular novel, although M.K. Naik, would like to put all such novels in the category of 'Novel of the hour'. It can truly be considered as the product of popular culture. This novel, although published in 1991, represents social and cultural conditions of India during 1990's. It represents multi-faceted realities of people from different spheres of life and of different regions of India that may be safely put under the category *Bharat* mentioned above.

Kaveri Nambisan, a trained doctor, comes from Coorg region of Karnataka. She had won Fellowship of Royal of College of Surgeons, London at the age of 24. Since then she has worked primarily in rural India. *The Truth (Almost) about Bharat* is her first novel. Her other well-known novels are *The Scent of Pepper* (1996), *Mango-coloured Fish* (1998) and *On Wings of Butterflies* (2002). The present paper takes up *The Truth (Almost) about Bharat* for a closer analysis. *The Truth (Almost) about Bharat* exhibits the campus life of Medical students, their aspirations and despairs without any fanfare as Kaveri Nambisan herself is a doctor and knows these medical institutions from the inside. It is a first person narrative told by the protagonist Vishwanath Saragan aka Tarzan aka Bharat. The ambiguous title not only represents Bharat, the main character in the novel but also refers to the importance of the mechanics of the binary India/Bharat since 1990s.

II

The novel represents the main protagonist Bharat, a nineteen year old medical student juggling between two extremes – *Bharat* (rural India) and *India* (New Age India). *Bharat* is representative of sentiments of people of rural area. *Bharat* seems to be influenced by Agrarian ethos, which implies traditional thoughts, orthodox approach and living in joint family. On the other hand, *India* is representative of New Age India, where there is predominance of western thoughts, scientific and modern approach and living in nuclear families.

The first part of the novel sub-titled as *The Mess* focuses mainly on the routine affairs of the students of an elite private Medical College in Delhi with Bharat at the center. The epigraph to the novel has been taken from *The Prophet* of Khalil Gibran which very succinctly states its theme. The lines are:

*Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and the daughters of Life's longing for itself.
... You may give them your love but not your thoughts,
For they have their own thoughts.
... their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow(Nambisan 1)*

In these lines Nambisan conveys, through Bharat, the philosophy of the young generation. He is representative of typical Indian Youth of the era of Liberalization who yearn for their

independence and seek their identity with reference to the ethos of their own time. They want to experience living independent lives. The sub-title with intended puns also works as a metaphor. It is as much about the mess in the college campus on account of the mess with the wages of the mess workers of the hostel as much it is about the mess in the life of Bharat in particular and students in general. 'Don't mess with us' attitude of the college administration leads to the mess Bharat inadvertently puts himself in. His rustication along with his friends leads to a general strike and commotion at the campus. Bharat, to vent out his anger at the establishment best represented by Professor of Surgery, throws a stone to damage his car which is as clean and well-maintained as clean and perfect his surgical procedures are. But he misses the target and the "fat stone struck Shafruddin the chowkidar in the head and he was rushed to Cas for suturing" (13)

Although nobody knows that the stone was thrown by Bharat, he feels guilty about it. When his guilt is compounded by several problems at home and his friends' behaviour he starts having hallucination about Shafruddin's death and runs away from home. His running away becomes a journey of experiences of life and attains maturity at the end of the journey/novel. The narrative and the mindset of the protagonist are at a stage where the rest of the narrative can take a legitimate bildungsroman. One of the two friends has already apologized and his rustication has been revoked and the other has stolen his girlfriend. His ever cribbing, complaining and chiding mother can't understand his problem. He lives in a world that a young person of his age would consider perfect from the outside: a home, a father to support economically and only six months to complete MBBS which he is expected to do excellently as he had been consistently getting good grades. This almost perfect world is shattered by fast paced happenings of his very recent past. So he does what a rebellious youth, who has lived in a protected environment, might do, i.e. runs away. But it is not a simple running. Though he is not clear about his plans, but he wants to see India. He is without much money, without references and without any itinerary so he is poised "to live deliberately" (Thoreau 61). He leaves Delhi, the metropolis on his bike 'Bluebird' and with that he also leaves 'India'. The first part 'The Mess' is indeed ironical as Bharat's life enters a phase of another mess, this time only bigger and deeper. During this journey, he faces many ups and downs in his life. He wanders to different places of 'Bharat' and meets people of different hues of character almost straight out of the popular Hindi movies. The experiences which he gets during this journey enrich his life and teach him lessons for life.

Bharat grew up in the years when the euphoria of Independence had waned and a certain amount of dissatisfaction with the system had started setting in. Hence, he is not happy with his name. Unable to bear the burden of his name, he decides to escape away from his home. His dissatisfaction is evident from the following lines which appear in the epigram to the second part of the novel. The declaration in these lines may be a routine process of a court of law but majority of readers are familiar with it through movies and T.V. serials:

*I Vishwanath Sarangan,
also, unfortunately called Bharat,
and, fortunately known as Tarzan
declare that everything that follows is the Truth*

the whole Truth and hardly anything but the Truth. (37)

His love for his nick name Tarzan is symptomatic of our obsession with western things. It is not only an interplay of the fortunate/unfortunate about Tarzan/Bharat, but equally important is the use of the verbs ‘called’/ ‘known’ for these names respectively. His reaction represents the mood of a large section of our society: “I am unfortunate to have been born around the time when India defeated a not-so-big enemy and created Bangladesh. Thousand parents awed by greatness of our nation named their son Bharat.” (55). Bharat certainly is not an isolated and freak case who displays this attitude but an example of a wider cultural phenomenon that M.N. Srinivas puts very succinctly as:

A distinct teenage culture is emerging or has already emerged as a result of the emergence of sizeable middle class whose youth offer tempting market for a variety of goods which can be advertised in the newspaper and on TV. The teenagers are recognizable by their distinctive dress, hair style, lingo, habits and life-style. Their heroes and heroines are usually sportsmen, athletes, film stars, rock musicians and models (185).

Bharat, thus, can be safely read as a metaphorical representation of *Bharat* (country) undergoing a cultural reconfiguration in terms of imbibing values generated by the interactions between the traditional cultural practices and democratic system of our country and the imperatives of a global liberal economy and cultural practices it generates. Being addressed as ‘Tarzan’ is meaning endowing to Bharat since it carries the validation of the mores of the teenage subculture the mores he subscribes to. In other words it is correct in terms of the semantic structures of his immediate social group. The narrative in the first part of the novel represents Bharat’s life in the urban setting of Delhi in around 1989-90.

Around this time consumerism has started playing an important role in re-structuring the ethos of Indian society. Obsessed with brands, Bharat always mentions motor bikes by brand name like *Yamaha* which Shanks rides and he loves to flaunt his *Hero Honda* bike by calling it as Blue Bird. The names of foreign brands have made deep impact on the mind of Bharat that can be reflected in his description of Neelam in the same language: “Neelam is the daughter of Colonel Sethi and she has skin the colour of Milky Nescafe” (Nambisan 20). The older generation is also not free from this ‘foreign obsession’ as Bharat’s mother wants to send him to Canada for higher studies, which is reflection of the parental anxiety about the career of their children. M.N. Srinivas comments on this anxiety in these words: “Parental anxiety reaches its apogee, however, at the time of their offspring seeking admission to college, in particular to Medical, Engineering, Technical and other Professional Colleges” (182).

The ‘truth’ about *India* is dealt with in this manner in the novel. The journey which he undertakes in part two of the novel is indeed significant because it is a journey inside *Bharat*. This journey proves a great learning experience for him. He reaches quite near the place his father started his life as a mechanic of watches and clocks, thus, establishing an emotional

bond with the place to appreciate and appropriate his paternal roots. The journey takes him near the ground reality of India. He is able to experience and understand various social, political, cultural issues during this journey.

The first place he reaches during journey is Lalithankpur, where he meets Bhojvi Singh, the leader of Chambal dacoits who is mistaken for a police inspector by Bharat. Bhojvi Singh looks a golden hearted dacoit who rises against the exploitative archaic feudal order of the society, and is referred to as *Bhagi*, not dacoit. He seems to be a character straight out of popular 'Hindi dacoit movies' of 1960's and 1970's or from Manmohan Kumar Tammna's equally popular book *During* his brief stay with Bhojvi Singh, he comes to know that Bhojvi Singh had been in the Army and became a dacoit when all attempts to get justice for the wrongs done to his family failed – his sister was raped and killed. He also realizes that he is a kind-hearted dacoit who loots the rich to help the needy and does not harm or kill innocent people. He is considered to be a messiah by villagers of that area. Bharat treats Bhojvi Singh's mother who was suffering from neurotic disorder but her immediate problem was of that of lice which did not let her sleep and remain quiet. He applies anti-lice lotion to her hair. After years altogether, the old woman sleeps quietly and everyone is impressed. Lalithankpur represents a rural India, where people are still living under ignorance. Bharat is also amazed that dacoits can be kind hearted persons. He gets in to trouble when he is asked to abort Bhojvi's niece's foetus of six months. With best wishes expressed by both Bharat and Bhojvi Singh, he finally leaves Chambal.

Bharat's experience in the Chambal ravines serves several purposes of the writer – a peep into the sensational, the fantastic, the forbidden; the social aberration; life lived on the fine edge; the archaic past as a living reality; mechanics of the police and judicial system; displacement /replacement of the center by the margin and so. Majority of the urban youth remains blissfully unaware and insulated from this India – a completely different world, but it is here that larger chunk of our population lives. Along with Bharat, young urban 'Indian' readers (who can read only English language) are also taken to a guided tour of 'Bharat'.

His next stop is at Gwalior where he meets Trilok Padmavathi Shastri (T. P. S.), a sincere middle-class politician, who is contesting elections as an independent candidate without using sacks of money, muscle power and camp followers, the usual paraphernalia associated with Indian politicians. He says, "I want to give my wife equality, status and self-esteem. See, I've included her name, 'Padmavathi', in mine, as a mark of adoration and respect" (Nambisan 64). But Bharat as well as the reader knows only too well the dynamics of Indian politics and society to perceive it a mere idealism. The narrative takes Bharat to another lesson, a lesson in Indian politics in action. 'Might is Right' and 'Money is Right' are the dictums of Indian politics. T. P. S., himself, admits his helpless condition in his election campaigns speech T. P. S. "got only twenty people, mostly women" (66) including the narrator. Bharat knows only too well that honest people in politics have almost no chance to win, though he wishes him to win the election, and wishes TPS good luck.

Bharat's next destination, after a brief stay in Bangalore, is Mysore, the city of Maharaja Statues, he wonders where his Appa's Wizard Watch Repair Works had been. He falls ill and visits Dr. Franklin Ragrunath Rao for treatment. Later on, he gets chance to assist him. Bharat was inspired by the success story of Dr. FRR, though he is surprised to find that he has three wives. These women belong to different religions. He takes a pun at the situation by saying that all three represent secular India. From Dr. FRR he has also learnt that "surgeons are a mean species who cut their patients according to their cash" (95). The episodes set in Mysore become an occasion for the novelist to critically evaluate the 'noble' medical profession and juxtapose the two doctors – DRR and "Old Slick Fingers" (81). FRR has encouraged him to be true to himself and be a good doctor to serve patients. Bharat seriously considers becoming a general practitioner in Paharganj (Delhi) after completing his Degree. Having learnt lesson about his professional life and necessary training which he might not have got as a part of the official training he is ready to move on in his journey of knowing the true *Bharat* further.

He reaches Kodagau and then reaches the next spot Tellicherry in Kerala. He meets Rajee there. She is a sixteen year old girl, studying in Pre-university. He gets mesmerized not only by her beauty but by her intelligent suggestions. After being ditched by Neelam, he felt Rajee to be a better choice. She seems to have deep influence on him. In fact, he sees a perfect life-partner in her. He wants to marry her right after his internship. He even starts imagining his happy married life with her. He reveals all his life to her, tells her of his

. . . yuppie dreams being dashed to the ground . . . stone hitting Shafu . . . Neelam's butter softness that drove me nuts and drove me to break Shanks thumb. Of Ma's mile-long sermons and the feel of Shafu's spit on my face that filled me with guilt and cowardice and made me leave home. Of Bhojvi's death-dealing lifeless arms, of female sadhus and women who sell their souls to godmen. Of Appa's flood pants, Ma's kajal eyes and magenta lips and Siji's til chutney. Of Rishi's sexless world and Shanks' sexed-up one. Hasmukh's army-green face before the RD puke, Shafu's marvelous teeth, the smell of thirty thousand nearly dead chickens, and the barber snipping hairs from VIP nostrils. I talked till I had nothing more to say. (117)

This short paragraph summarizes the plot as well as Bharat's life, the details can be filled in by the reader without affecting much either the trajectory of Bharat's life or of the plot.

The last turning point comes in the narrative when Shanks comes to Kerala hoping to meet him. Bharat had written a letter to him a few days back without telling him about specifics of his whereabouts. He catches up with everything. Shafu is fine and was back on the job in a fortnight. Bharat is now ready to reveal his feeling of love for Rajee and he goes to meet her as promised only to come to know that she was already married and was waiting for her husband who was working in Riyadh. This is his second 'heart break'. Initially, it is difficult for him to accept this disappointment but he is able to rationalize and accept it.

All these developments in four months' time work as a kind of higher education for him. He decides to reconcile with college authorities. When he comes to know that his mother has left home, he also decides to bring her back to home. This journey makes him emotionally and intellectually more mature. He develops insight towards life. The lessons which he has learnt are unforgettable and these have made him better person. The novel ends with a socially mature Bharat who is now poised to accept being Vishwanath, though Tarzan would also be taken in stride.

III

The Truth (almost) about Bharat is composed within the broad framework of popular literature. Popular literature "may be summarized by two tacit equations: Popular Literature=bad literature . . . Popular Literature=Genre Literature" (Swirski n. page). Within this paradigm it can be viewed as: a simple, unidirectional and strictly chronological plot line; young educated upper middle class urban characters, particularly the lead characters; suitable contemporary storyline to carry and convey contemporary concerns; close proximity to the portrayals in cinema and T.V.; absorbable cultural shocks and sufferings and losses only in a moderate amount; conversational and young people's jargon dominated language, to name a few characteristics. Kaveri Nambisan in this novel adheres to all these characteristics and the novel seems to have been written with a young readership in mind. The novel is replete with campus lingo that is typical of professional education institutes. For teaching faculty, they use abbreviations such as CP for Chidambaram Pillai, Dean, Medical College and TV for Trivikramananda, Dean Engineering College. They also use abbreviations for some things like GB (for Gin and Beer) and MB (for MBBS course). Bharat also uses TPS (for Trilok Padmavathi Shastri) and FRR (for Dr. Franklin Raghunath Rao). The repetition of words constitutes an important aspect of students' communication, for example, 'crazy crazy crazy world', 'very very cosy', 'bright, bright future' etc. Some bilingual expressions are also used like 'line maro dames' for eve-teasing, 'bullu films' for 'blue films' etc. There is prominence of Hinglish words. This campus lingo serves the purpose of immediately establishing a rapport with the target audience –boys and girls in teens and early twenties— students of institutions spread from metropolis to dusty non-descript towns. Such novels act as self-help guides to the students of hinterland by enriching their language by providing the seasoning of the metropolitan conversational patterns of language and help bringing about amalgamation of the Indian and the Western culture.

Popular fiction is considered more a cultural text than a literary text hence its semantic possibilities also should be traced in their being a part of the cultural process and the cultural functions they perform. One of the most important charges against popular literature is that it "at best produces spurious gratification, and at worst can be emotionally and cognitively harmful to the reader" (Swirski). Bharat's experiences do not prepare the reader to deal with the issues of life by confronting them. He simply runs away from the scene of action to meet with people who show sympathetic, helping and encouraging attitudes towards him. Marital discord (Bharat's and his friends' parents); commercialization of education and degeneration of professional ethics (the apathetic attitude of the medical college management and the professor of surgery); caste and money controlled electoral practices and degradation

of democracy (election campaign of TPS); crumbled law and order and judicial system (Bhojvi's case) are only some of the serious cultural issues that have been dealt with by the narrator and the writer in a simplistic manner without charting out their deep seated etiology or far reaching social implications. Is life so simple and linear where strangers of all hues support us, acting like foster parents? The lessons implicitly imparted by the narrative vindicate Swirski's charge. Do they not lead to cognitive impairment of the readers? Does the happy ending of the novel not give the reader an emotional satisfaction and a false assurance of social amity? For most readers the answers would be affirmative.

But the narrative also opens the possibility of looking at it from a different perspective. It offers an opportunity to look at the backdrop of day-to-day activities of young people, their aspirations and the social atmosphere they operate within. The narrative, howsoever glossy it might be, also reflects the corporate and feudal values that promote values of consumption, competition, hierarchy, sexism, homophobia, casteism and contempt for equality within the trajectories of the value system that is buttressed by the twin axis of corporate fashioned liberal global futuristic values and the feudalism fashioned tradition subservient local backward oriented values. The potentialities and possibilities of reading the novel as a critique of the system as such may be limited but cannot be negated altogether. The novel also follows the bildungsroman form minus the great ethical/spiritual qualms beyond an ordinary individual's control. Kaveri Nambisan by locating the action of the novel in the contrasting and conflicting cultural spaces represented by 'India' and '*Bharat*' exhibits different aspects of India as a nation. Many social, cultural, political and economic problems of India from the limited perspective of a teenager are highlighted. At the surface level, the novel may appear to be a narrative of a medico student named Bharat but at deeper level it can be considered to be a narrative of contemporary India aka *Bharat*.

To wrap up the discussion of the novel, several issues need to be brought up together. First is the relationship of central protagonist with the target readership i.e. Indian youth. Bharat could be any student of any professional college. The sufferings and trials that he goes through are quiet bearable physically, emotionally and ethically. So it is easy for such students to identify themselves with issues, ideals and react to these ideals and issues without facing grave intellectual or emotional qualms.

Second issue is the need, rationale and expected ending of the story. Bharat is heading back to medical college and the readers are left to imagine his dreams come true. His dream is to serve people in the back lanes of Delhi like Dr.FRR, but unlike Dr.FRR happy with only one wife and few kids.

Third, the novel can be read as a progeny of those eighteenth century English novels which were read by newly literate, newly migrant as 'self-help books' particularly for adolescents in development of personal identity. The novel inspires the readers to have little fun of life, disagreement and defiance and even running away from life but ultimately coming round

with a resolution to become a professionally qualified practitioner, earn lots of money, take early retirement and serve community.

Last issue, a careful reading of novel also proposes to bring in seemingly incompatible *India* and *Bharat* together. The education of the protagonist Bharat that prepares him to sort out his personal issues takes place in the hinterland, dominated by people like Bhojvi Singh, TPS (Trilok Padmavati Shastri) and Dr.FRR(Franklin Raghunath Rao) who act contrary to law, politics and medical profession. In short his education in the hinterland i.e. *Bharat* prepares him to confront *India* head on. The novel, unmistakably, tries to create narrative of *Bharat* and *India* interacting with each other in meaningful manner rather than always challenging and quarrelling with each other.

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