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Ajeet Bharti's "Bakar Puran": As a Narrative of Contemporaneous Contexts and their Meaningful Misrepresentations

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Abstract:

In this paper, I propose a reading into Ajeet Bharti's "Bakar-Puran" as a powerful satire, simultaneously becoming a social document within cultural contexts, generating a social energy that the common psyche spontaneously responds to. Unlike most satirists, the pro-humanistic stance of the writer makes it a text worth-reading and remembering where a satirist is not distant but part of the whole and whose self is metonymic. He is at absolute ease with his ambience and characters rather enjoys every nuance of it though remaining distant in thoughts, being critical and objective. The satire is humor based acting to level the field, allowing people who identify with each other to create social groups. Thus, humor becomes a voice of the people, spoken in many instances under many contexts. It also becomes a means to transmit experience and claim values to one another while also highlighting solidarity and shared identity.

Keywords: Chronotopes, Structural narratology, hybridized spaces, distortion, behavioral reflexes, stereotypes, media-representations, nostalgia, mannerisms.

Ajeet Bharti's "Bakar- Puran," published by Hind Yugm, New Delhi, 2016, enters the world of humor- writing as a refreshing, startling satire having a characteristic newness in content and style of writing. The book deviates from convention, forces itself on the reader's attention, makes him laugh, pause and think as to unearth the meanings that are suggested if not stated. When conversations become literature, the literature gets its ultimate meaning as it is not read but lived, in thoughts and words, becoming spirited and lively. It is a process of metamorphosis of men into books, a transformation where the marginality of life and literature gets diminished. The participatory character is the theme; he is the content and bears a style that is distinct, unique, ingenious and appealing. Absurdities and grossness become a part of the whole just as rationality, compassion and consideration become themes.

Incidents and images bring out layers of meanings to show their meaninglessness, irrelevancy and triviality. Unlike others, the humor is alternately playful and sarcastic, as he is a generous and considerate friend with a sarcasm that is devoid of contempt and that way, the author himself is the embodiment of the crowd. He refuses to be alone and despite reserving some right to differ and argue, he is never scathy and mostly sympathetic. Short anecdotes of the day to day lives of

bachelor boys is a form of new experimentation in humor-writing where the borders of humor and life intermingle to seek pursuance of all the hidden sincerities that the contemporary world expects and demands of the young men.

In the Title, the writer specifies that it is a "Satire on Bachelors" and adds on the blurb that contrary to the title, "Bakar" meaning "useless gibbering", "there is nothing nonsensical and the book is uprightly literary." It is a world of conscious young-men; who, though apparently careless and free are conscientiously serious about the world they belong to and also about the world that is beyond their grasp. These are the Young men who draw humor on the canvass of their mundane lives that is; otherwise lived in an unending pursuance of them worldly desires and dreams. It is a world that exclusively belongs to them, where in poets and writers, politicians, players, historians, sociologists, painters and theologians are all inclusive and get relative participation through the bachelors' enormous conversations. Most important aspect being the air of freedom in which the literature breathes allowing space to all sorts of criticism.

It is a world of paradoxes and paradigms, ambiguities and ambivalence, distinction and dissent, as well as transgression and temporariness. The subjective reality of the dweller of our 21st century room is the part of this postmodernist culture which is constituted of millions of individuals residing in innumerable such rooms located in geo-political reality but living in virtual reality of cyberspace. He can manage to carry many cultural traditions simultaneously. Every individual is free to formulate one's combination for a cultural identity that is selective, hybrid, ambivalent combining regional with transnational. In such a world, culture is bound to be made up of innumerable components that defy falling in any one single category. This book is a specimen of contemporary cultural reality that includes a wide range of deliberate acceptance may be called 'cultural subscription.' Despite all its complexity, continuity, correspondence and commensuration, culture remains an indispensable element to substantiate social reality of mankind and through the book; present world can be seen to be constituted of multiplicities. There is no central force to bind it in a coherent structure; rather it is a fractured world where virtual realities precede the actual physical realities to supply an image as a substitute for every idea or occurrence.

According to Canadian television and newspaper critic John Doyle, "there are specific periods when satire is necessary. We've entered one of those times." (Globe and Mail). The unstable times need voicing through criticism, the changing shift in cultural issues, language etc. The humor in Bakar Puran cannot be categorized in a rigid way, as the book is a blend of comedy, intrigue, wit, remorse, anguish and sentiments. Whatever it is, it is never misleading. It is a critique of human behavior, vice or folly, with the intent of persuading the audience to view it disdainfully and thereby encourages a degree of social change.

The text is a candid reflection upon the social performance of the young men as their day-to-day life, activities; behavioral norms get a candid reflection. The nervous mannerisms and tastes of the middle class men who imitate cosmopolitan attitudes and habits sometimes to cope up

with others is depicted skillfully. In them can be perceived a natural craving to go back to the roots and forsake the life of appearances. Their useless squandering after fanciful love and women is disapproved of by skirmishes and jocularities. Bharti is ingenious in his description and there is neither condemnation nor dissension of any sort. The prose is not ornate or decorative but is full of simplicity, energy and vigour. Derision, Chaffing, taunting, jibing, taunting, scoffing, jeering become a feature of the dialogue. Humor, here, becomes an important basis of social cohesion- a private language of the in-group. Recognition that other people think the same way as ourselves and share our problems and experiences is a major source of humorous pleasure.

The writer pictures the external details of life, the fashions, manners, mannerisms, speech, interests, the scenes are of the social spaces like cinema-hall, streets, localities, hostels. The people portrayed are social, mild, romantic, sensitive to others and most importantly, honest. It is the vagrant honesty of emotions and actions triggered by such flux of emotions that the writer draws attention to, sometimes disapproving their coarseness with a slight sneer. Overtones of disapproval of behavioral reflexes are evident, and the writer cautiously refrains from advocating morality. The habits/ behavioral patterns/ immoralities explained or described are utterly harmless on the ground that the world in which the characters move is a world of commoners and the commonality that is a shared experience is only too real. The short anecdotes on the behavior of men inside cinema hall, on Valentine's Day, train- journeys, in love, observation on festivals, food and childhood memoirs are an informal portrayal of life and society with less scorn and coarseness. The resentments are mild that show harmless insincerities aligning with merriment.

Sarcasm on lyrics and music is a major theme. Music, the popular one, with distortion as a feature is widely and hugely accepted by the crowd. It is this love for distortion which is trenchantly satirized. The distortion and degradation in music, lyrics, reflects upon the dearth of thoughts and shallowness of emotions. It sideways, pronounces the development of a borderless culture that is gradually demolishing so called cultural taboos in the post- modernist consumer society allowing the 'Other' without concessioning the 'self'. It can be called an experience that consists of embracing the radical represented in 'other' without sacrificing the ego that forms the 'Self'. The writer intentionally describes each and every sentence of song pointing at the scarcity of sincere emotions, which are either forgotten or are unwanted. The use of words like, 'cutter', 'butter', 'fevicol', 'doll', 'miss-call', 'bat-ball', 'cinema-hall', 'marriage-hall', 'over-all', 'photo', 'faint', 'close', 'shutter', 'daughter', 'quarter', 'water' may appear apprehensive at first hand as it thwarts the literariness of the lyric but in the process of carrying them forward, the writer maintains 'an exact casualness of manner' adding humor to the text.

Through the popular songs and lyrics, he ruthlessly exposes the commoditization of woman in films through songs simultaneously degrading the stature of woman in day-to-day conversation and language.

Distortion in songs and films is integral to stereotyping, pornography and ideology in media representations of women. More women work in the media than are reflected by the content in these media. That is, though the demographics of work have changed, the attitudes towards women have not. Films and songs do not, mostly represent or capture this changing demographics of gender, but rather distort them and suggest a patriarchal ideology.

Fragmenting the women's identity into material parts in songs (lamretta, tandoori chicken etc.) is pointed at with an intention to expose the vulgarity that splits woman into various parts all of which are to do with her physical appearance: tall, short, fair, dark, stout. This excessive fragmentation of her physical features reinforces the cultural emphasis on a woman's appearance and her utility. Also, the desperateness and willingness of women to get noticed, makes her into a material body. This cultivation and display of women body in cinema and song is contemporaneous with the rise of both consumerism and politically energized middle classes. Most importantly, the relation of youths to music is less a case of seizing anything of unusual interest, but more a case of indifferent acceptance. Drawing meaning out of these songs is quite a task and by attempting to give the songs a meaning, the author successfully shows their meaninglessness and absurdity.

The author reciprocates this compulsion upon the youths who are left with no better choices, in the following words, "In a world that propagates modernity by reading fashion magazines sitting upon a commode, in such a world, any kind of absurd argument can be made into logic."

Rachel Dwyer suggests that, "the male at the end of the 20th century...is groomed, maintained exercised and dressed in the clothes of consumer society. An object of his own narcissistic gaze he also invites the gaze of the audience on his body in a way traditionally associated with women (Dwyer and Patel). Song- sequences have frequently appropriated the female body for the male's voyeuristic pleasure.

In Laura Mulvey's view (1975); the scopophilic drive informs all cinematic representation. Mulvey's argument is that looking is defined as a male activity, and being looked at belongs to 'natural' female passivity. Women function as erotic objects for male protagonists with whom the male viewer can identify. That is, the male viewer looks through the eyes of the male protagonist (on screen) at the woman-as-object. It is therefore a simultaneous process of identification and objectification. Cinema however is more than a fantasy world: it is rooted in actual social conditions and relations. Bharti attacks on this stereotypical idea of women on screen. The cultivation and display of women body in cinema and song is contemporaneous with the rise of both consumerism and politically- energized middle-classes.

Talking on cinema-goers, Bharti never characterizes spectator emotions as 'good' or 'bad'. He points at the audience's state of being 'absorbed' or 'immersed' in the film. The viewers also accept an emotional role. The audience, who is conscious of watching illusions, also revels in them as 'real'. A film, one of the most public of activities has many audiences. Audiences are

heterogeneous, anomic, multiple, even conflictual, and respond to films in heterogeneous ways. When the residents of Mukherji Nagar constituting mainly young men coming from other states of India go to watch a fiction film, they in a way, participate in a ritual. Here, the audience is both participant and spectator. The writer adds that the mass of young people come here, mainly for entertainment. The gaze is collective. The audiences belonging to different class, who get discriminated by the official rate of ticket, watch the same film indiscriminately for the kind of emotional experience that it has to offer.

The extremity in behavioral changes and mannerisms of the people belonging to different strata of society in a common public space viz., cinema hall is mocked at by showing the difference that the people belonging to different social status adhere to. The idea of homogeneous modernity itself comes within the purview of interrogation. Cinema hall is a space where meanings are contested, distorted and revived in a continuous process; it is a component of civil society where a realm of social meanings and pleasures, the globalized, hybridized spaces where elite/non-elite, urban/non-urban, metropolitan/folk elements mix easily.

The writer inadvertently point at the discriminatory and controversial stand of people at different public space situations, "*It is unfortunate that in this country, the sensible people watch late night shows and during the day a few people beat a young man to death in the marketplace. His only fault was that he belonged to Arunachal.*" Maintaining a status-quo by the educated upper-class, sophisticated elite shows their indifference that harms the delicate fabric of social harmony.

Through short yet sharp observations on the repetitive stereotypical scenes of hindi cinema the author criticizes at the lack of situations, events, imaginings in the hindi movies that also hints at the lack of subjects in them. In a sequence of short anecdotes with the title, "*Hindi filmon mein aisa hi kyon hota hai*" (Why this only happen in Hindi films), he points at the continuous repetition of scenes in hindi films, scenes where the same ideology is glorified, where the poor hero wins over his rich 'would-be father-in-law', the dacoits having high moral values, following standard ideologies, viz., helping the poor, having a regard for the honor of poor women.

Films construct the mobilized (and mobilizing) subaltern hero as an agent of national reconciliation and social reform. These repetitive themes of the star's moral uprightness frequently make him a system victim wronged by the law, by society, and even by his own family. The fact that he is outside the law, does not make him bad, he has been forced into this role. The moments of crisis invariably revolve around the women- from the moment of weakness to a rape or a severe conflict with her estranged father. The hero's task is to rescue the woman. In this way, the audience never sees a film for the first time, he has already seen it. Stars are made for profit, and they constitute an important component of the way in which films are sold. The presence of a star in the film ensures its saleability and audience.

In the structural narratology, in some short conversations, Buddha is brought in to act a mediator or as an auxiliary support in the structural semiotics. The subject is helped by him to solve the elements of pain or anguish arising out of situations that are unhandy. Bringing in the figure of the Buddha helps create a social context of mutual difference which is the heart of conversation. Buddha, renders in artistic way the interconnectedness of spatial and temporal relationships. Space and time get interconnected showing their fluidity, when anxieties criss-cross, though the chronotopes (Yaksh, Yuddhisthira, Arjun etc.) are rooted in the local conditions. The cultural codes belong to the community of youths who share the simultaneity of many levels of dialogue and language. The absence of one consistent plot, the fragmented nature of narrative where there is no linear or cause and effect sequence in the plot/ narration, the re-telling of canonical and well-known tales, the use of graphics make it into a Postmodern narratology. As for example, the trauma of getting a technical education with assorted degrees like B.Tech is mocked at by resorting to the myth of Yaksh and Yuddhisthira in the familiar style in which those inevitable questions were posed. The author mocks at the system of higher education by stating that the questions on the how of getting a BTech degree can be altogether dismissed by stalwarts like Yuddhisthira even at the cost of his brother's lives. The uselessness of degrees that lead to "nowhere" is undefined and similarly the efforts made to attain them.

The cultural anxiety is reinforced when young men seek to move into spaces hitherto defined female. Exploring masculine anxiety for female spaces and attention is delicately handled. Sexual jealousy as a male stereotype or behavior is mocked at, though in a lighter vein. The overlap of materialistic choices deters the growth of personal bonding, when time and relations get a second place than petty material things, where love has seen a despairing limitation of being within the conditions of fake promises, hugs, and exchange of gifts, chocolates and teddies.

In a casual style of conversation, the author points at the problems of the contemporary social life, political scene, serious problem of unemployment, aimlessness among youths, broken relationships and the agony arising from it. The book is not silent, rather garrulous and avoids suggestions; on the contrary, it speaks and speaks it all thus becoming a voice. There is a tension of erosion of values, a subtle interrogation on the achievement that the youths can have for this pursuance. There is a need to re-discover stability in a fast-changing age, where values and ideals are at stake. In a consumerist, globalized society where the middle class finds itself increasingly the victim of signs, brands, stereotypes, there is an inherent anxiety and fear of having being lost in the dilemma of meaninglessness of pursuance of objects and relationships.

For the youths who are striving for a bright career in metropolitan cities, the inherent desire to be at home never fades away. They bear a longing inside for home, to be at the village where mother is important as she is repository of tradition, family values and a symbol of stable emotion of love. This hankering for home and family-values shows displacement as not chosen but forced. The 'home' is a nostalgic assertion of a sign system that is increasingly unavailable to many metropolitan Indians of the 1990's. Simultaneously, the detailed description of homely

festivals, rituals, traditions shows their continuing influence/impact upon the lives of the modern men, that these rituals are not to be dragged on but properly venerated by the generations to follow.

Side by side the author also depicts the influence of modernity in the observance of rituals or pujas in the metropolitan cities, where the form of worship, observing of fast etc, are all commercialized. On the pretext of being the upholders of cultural norms, the young women in a way make a mockery of the rituals by making them a show-business.

Despite the fact that it comes in the category of popular literature, it deals with practical and emotional problems. The distinctive characteristic of popular literature, as it is said, is the absence of an explicitly ideational element, of the intent to convey intellectual information, and yet, “Bakar- Puran” concludes with the lines,

“In this age of Kali, pornography would get huge appreciation, as a realistic cinema, slangs would get transformed into music and cheap erotic books would become literature. Gradually, this society would move towards destruction and after the end of a phase, good literature would be written again.”

Certain messages that the text aimed at a mass audience have a form of having its origin from one amongst themselves and which is not imposed upon them by the cultural elite. This continues the ongoing aesthetic debate on popular literature but with a sign of being virtually indistinct from high culture, in the postmodern view.

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