Decoding the Politics of Politoons: A Study of its Heroic Representation

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Abstract:

Artist are magical elfs. Evoking symbols and motifs that connect us to our deeper selves, they can help us along the heroic journey of our own lives. (Campbell 132)

Just as the physiognomy of a person changes with every passing age, without one actually coming to know the appearance of change in colour and firmness of the facial muscles, likewise the gradual 'pigmentation'(pigmentation is a term used to suggest the change that appears through creative liberty) brought into objective reality to be captured into a narrative is done with equal dexterity by the artist, with a firmness of purpose. So if one tends to successfully delve into psychological or intellectual space of an artist, one might probably come to the conclusion that creations are just believed to be its creator's impersonal rendition, yet the subjective tampering in his creative art, seems to raise a question on its "depersonalization" (a term used by T.S Eliot to foreground his 'Theory of Impersonal Poetry'). Although Eliot compares the poet to a catalyst, yet he still could not do away, of holding artist slightly responsible, for creating "the pressure, so to speak under which the fusion takes place".(Eliot 8) One might probably say how this slight admission on his part ie the artist's subjective linkage to his creativity, would leave a cue for future critics and historians like Hayden White to start his journey of what he calls "reemplotment", a liberty that any artist takes to render meaning to his quintessential project. With inductive research, he exposes the ideological nature of history in particular and creative art in general. He describes reemplotment as the ability of the historians to emboss historical narratives with literary tropes (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony) to reconfigure historical events in ways that the audience are made intelligible to the content of the narrative.

This figurative coding, accordingly substantiate the above quotation by Campbell, taken from his seminal book *Pathways to Bliss: Mythology and Personal Transformation.* It therefore indicates how historical coding is spilled with artistic maturity of writer's ideologically and politically charged mind, therefore seizing to give us the whole truth.

Likewise, Politoons (Political Cartoons) can be of no exception, to the above conception of non-conformity to complete objectivity, in reconfiguration of political narratives. Perhaps it is this subjectivity that makes a good business for the news channel, as it strengthens the TRP (Television Rating Point) and this in turn helps in the marketing strategy of a particular party, persona, agenda, nation etc.

Accordingly, heroism or the concept of Hero loses its objectivity, for it is opinionated by the channel's think tank, which nonetheless comprises of carrying and supporting a particular political ideology, party or a person. Therefore, the concept of heroism/hero becomes a contested space, in the realm of politics in general, and Politoons in particular, for its association with power and control in former and its subjective expression in latter.

The paper will therefore focus on decoding epistemological explanation of political narrative in its non-objective form, therefore enabling the viewers/readers to be benefitted in a similar way to what Hayden White addresses as:

> this recognition would serve as a potent antidote to the tendency of historians to become captive of ideological preconceptions which they do not recognize as such" (White 99).

The paper therefore intends to take an analysis of roughly seven language strategies, used generally by news channels (like India TV and AajTak), in making of Politoons, as a subject of its heroic representation.

Keywords: politoons, politaintment, creative license, cultural studies, pragmatic turn.

Just like other forms of entertainment has undergone a technological change (considering changes brought through television media), politaintment too has received a facelift, by witnessing yet another turn, in a way similar to what Werner Wolf calls the "Intermedial turn". As political cartoons (in newspapers) are infused with mobility on various (Indian) news

channels (like Aaj Tak and India TV), while catering to the ideological and political needs of its audience. Such a change is well thought to create political awareness among masses, while promoting wide viewership through amusing and exaggerating figures. This change in 'medium' of dissemination requires us to interrogate the nature and politics of this code-switching from print to electronic media.

Media, as Werner Wolf puts it in his essay "(Inter) mediality and the Study of Literature", "makes a difference as to what kind of content can be evoked, how these contents are presented and how they are experienced". (Wolf 2) So, if Political cartoons carry medial (electronic media) representations, then there becomes an obvious possibility of how such contents and representations are evoked, presented and experienced. How various mediums bring differences in manifestation of the same political issues and public figures. For instance, print or editorial cartoons strike to the level of readers for their visual amusement alone, with limited techniques of visual irony and exaggeration at its disposal. Yet animated cartoons become an open reservoir of both verbal and visual irony and exaggeration, thereby having the capacity to sway the audience largely into its caricatured cocoon.

Talking of media without discussing the nature and use of language, is like shooting arrows in the dark, for according to Stuart Hall, "language is one of the media through which thoughts, ideas and feelings are represented in culture. Representation through language is therefore central to the processes by which meanings are produced" (Hall 1).

The paper will therefore categorically discuss the following strategies or languages (with examples) used by media channels in the making of Politoons and how these strategies invariably succeed in creating heroic images. These could be named as follows:

(a) Visual Strategy

(b) Sound Strategy

(c) Symbolic Strategy

(d) Juxta-positioning Strategy

(e) Prediction- making Strategy

(f) Code switching from Abstract to Visual representation Strategy

(g) Musical Strategy

However nowhere participants of a particular culture are neglected in such meaning-making process, in fact human beings are very much at the helm of such "language-games", as Hall mentions in his article "Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices", that:

> In part, we give things meaning by how we represent them- the words we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the values we place on them. (Hall 3)

(a)<u>**Visual Strategy:**</u>   The politics of exaggerated representation in Politoons therefore stands proven, for the use of various visual strategies that tends to either distort or magnify the physiognomy of their chosen political subjects (political leaders). This in turn shapes the image of that persona either as a hero or as a villian, thus capably registering such images in the minds of the audience. As an example, a politoon version, 'So Sorry', aired by India TV features our current Chief Minister of U.P, Yogi Adityanath, can be categorized as a perfect example for the visual strategy used by cartoon experts. This politoon version is titled as 'Tera Kya Hoga Romeo', which takes up the government's recent action on stalkers, as a call for women safety. One can witness how our Chief Minister is caricatured in the heroic image of an 'Angry Young Man' marching straight into his office, where a team of police officers waits on him to receive his orders for their next assignment. If one tends to race one's memory, this only reminds us of 70s, when the persona of Amitabh Bachchan playing the character of an angry young man had taken on the silver screen in Hindi cinema, quite by storm. Nevertheless, how well this depiction may have been received among the audience, is the question that might interest many of us.

Further the cartoon shows a projector on display, to define his first move towards the protection of women in Uttar Pradesh. The visual strategy used here is to parody his code of identifying such Romeos, as it launches a series of symbolic identifications to catch hold of such men. Certain dress codes are targeted as a mark of identification. It is seen that color pink or red bears the brunt of such an action, for a man found wearing a pink or red shirt becomes a threat symbol of skirt-chasers. Likewise, he throws several signs allowing a pretext for doubtful interrogation like head bands, wrist bands etc. It seems as if each of these signals of virility, no longer remains a symbol of heroism in the eyes of our present Chief Minister, but something which needs to be wiped off as weeds, that spoils the social productivity of women in Uttar Pradesh.

Yet assuming that every man with a wrist band or having tough muscles can be considered a chaser, is a misconception on the part of the officer's 'think tank'. This is what the cartoon probably aims to hit, at the end for it is seen after hours of inspection, the three policemen could not find anyone matching to that targeted identity, until they finally come across a man chasing a girl with open hair and attractive gait, only to find that she appears to be a male.

This is where the paper aims to unfold the dual politics of visual representation. For on one hand it probably exposes the anomalies in implementation of the government's strategic move, yet by creating 'visual metaphors' of the same action, it although more accentuates, the idea of identifying Romeos with hair or wrist band, even to the extent of denying any man to wear a pink or a red shirt, else he is tagged as a playboy. In other words, it causes to set an alarm in the minds of young generation, especially men to avoid wearing attractive colors or bands while taking to roads. Such visual representation embosses a complete denial in the mind of its audience, thus playing the politics of fear. To put it this way, that the concept of a romantic hero has to pay the highest price to acquit itself of the crime of being compartmentalized into a certain category.

 (b) **<u>Sound Strategy</u>:** Not only tampering with physical features is a norm in parodic construction, but meddling with physical voice of the person becomes a part of such strategic making. To mention an example of this could be the Politoon titled "AAP ke Sholay" by Aaj Tak, wherein the famous scene from historic Indian blockbuster "Sholay" is recreated in the political context, building the same graphics around, of a dark mountainous valley, only to find that it has a different star cast of political leaders from the national "Aam Aadmi Party". So, this time, it is not Amjad Khan as the villainous Gabbar interrogating his fellow dacoits, instead to our sheer bewilderment, we have the leader and Chief Minister of Delhi Arvind Kejriwal featuring in the voice and character of Gabbar, as he interrogates his partners in crime (dacoits).

Such a strategy makes it very obvious, the politics of verbal representation, that the impression the audience might carry with themselves can be anything but positive, either of its leader or of its party members.

(c) Symbolic Strategies: It is not just anatomy or voice that is given a symbolic representation through the cartoons but there are many non-living objects that are made to signify heroism in politics. As an illustration of this fact, we have a cartoon version broadcasted by another politoon series channeled by India TV entitled as "Oh My God". In one of the politoon advertisements, this news channel allows selected prominent leaders from different political parties to share a comic space in the animated version. Each of these leaders are caricatured in a 'symbolic' frame. So, hitting the screen first is our Honorable Prime Minister, Shri Narendera Modi, gracing the occasion with his royal entry in a horse drawn carriage. This carriage is injected into the scene not less of a purpose, for it has a symbolic status to convey to the audience. It perhaps stands as a symbol of victory, heroism, royalty, heritage, considering the historic victory attained by BJP in Uttar Pradesh State election 2017.

Leading him in front are a band of drummers including senior BJP leader Amit Shah who is believed to be the second next to Prime Minister, considering his significant role in party's major victory in the last U.P elections. The use of carriage now stands valid, for drummers are paving the way for the king of victory. If one is looking for a reason of introducing this royal get up in the scene, one can relate how the use of drum, too has symbolic connotations. According to Joseph Panek in his article, "The Drum (Symbol and Metaphor)" it "symbolizes, energizing one's troops while terrifying one's enemies". Secondly it connotes the "heartbeat of the universe" as if everyone is in unison with this particular party. It also signifies taking responsibility for and marching to the rhythm of one's own destiny. Even "Lord Shiva holds the drum in his extended right hand" which indicates that the "creation begins with the first beat of the drum and ends with the last beat", as if to indicate that they will rule till the end of the destruction.

With this metaphoric beginning, we witness other party leaders, belonging to different political parties. From the younger generation we have Rahul Gandhi (Congress leader), seen to be clinging to a pole while blowing a horn. It is indeed hilarious to watch a senior leader like him, to be in such a slacking position, while holding a horn in his other hand, as if a shepherd who blows on to gather his flocks. How realistically this speaks of his need for coalition with other national parties! In fact, we did witness such a coalition between Samaajwadi and Congress

Party for 2017 state elections. One cannot probably deny how his image is reduced to an anti-hero, even below to what one may objectively think of him off screen.

Later, Smt.Mayawati (Bahujan Samaajwadi Party leader) too steals the show with her grand entry on an elephant, a symbol reflecting her strength and tenacity like the animal. It seems though, unlike the lonely shepherd (Rahul Gandhi) she needs nothing to cling to for support, as she has her arms folded while enjoying the ride in her utmost ecstasy.

Following thereafter, is our former Chief Minister Akhilesh Yadav, (alias Mr Cool) seen to be riding his party symbol, a bicycle, followed by Mulayam Singh Yadav (his father) found to be chasing his son. The situation recreates the tension between father and son on a humorous note, adding fuel to fire to their already strained relation.

Next, we come across Aam Admi Party's senior leader and Chief Minister of Delhi Arvind Kejriwal, sitting on a van while showing off his lean and loosen biceps, as a demonstration of his pseudo- strength (considering his party's major defeat in UP's state election).

Finally, we have our former sovereign Chief Justice of India Mr Jagdish Singh Kehar, who appears with his gavel striking the gong which embosses the symbol of Balance of Justice.

Therefore, one can say that in the cartoon each of these personalities have one common denominator, essentially created with a symbolic perspective, to suggest either their heroic or diminutive status in politics.

(d) <u>Juxta-positioning Strategy:</u>   Politoons excel in creating parodic abutment, as a technique of creating visual amusement for swaying the audience towards a particular strategic and political pattern. Here in lies the tricks of such makers! The much sought-after debate on the controversial Islamic law of Triple Talaaq, finally found someone through a cartoon channeled by India TV, to challenge its authenticity from their lens, who lampooned the whole idea in a contested frame. It is none other than the present Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh Yogi Adityanath who has declared a war against The Muslim Personal Law Board's sanctioning the idea of Triple Talaaq. However, the present paper does not aim to justify or deny the validity of this established tradition of denouncing marriages (muslim) but rather aims to highlight how

such issues are recreated in a caricatured series. Not only C.M Yogi but our Honorable Prime Minister Narendra Modi too is shown to don the act of a hero rather well. The politics therefore lies in bringing two unmatched entities or concepts against each other, ie two men against a whole religious tradition, not only for visual gratification in terms of evoking humour but also to remodel the situation in a different light of accentuation. Here the politoon creates a juxtaposition of not only numbers (three times Talaaq versus three times Yogi), but the idea of repeated strength ie if the Islamic law arms a man with Triple Talaaq (the strength of three uttered words), then the BJP government makes sure that women too are equipped with three words to generate fear in men ie "Yogi, Yogi, Yogi". And who else could have been chosen to create such a terror in heart of men, other than C.M Yogi, who is known for his ardent style. It seems though, that for its makers, that one man is enough to challenge a whole religious doctrine.

(e) **Prediction making strategy:** Politoons exploit their creative license, for they play a major role in forming public opinion through their politics of prediction making. They recreate issues not only existing in the present, but also go beyond the chronology of time in anticipating the future, especially when it comes to predicting electoral results. "2019 Me Modi Ka Darr" is an apt example for the above-mentioned strategy.

(f) **Code switching from Abstract to Visual representation Strategy:** This is a unique strategy generally opted for, while creating visual wonder and amusement for the audience. Such a representation brings along abstract concepts like love, hate, war, to the forum of visual rendition. 'So Sorry', a politoon series gave wings to this idea of code switching from abstract to visual in its cartoon called 'Abki Baar Zubaan Se Var'. From the title one can expect a war of words, a necessary norm followed in the political system of lashing out at one's opposition, but here the episode tends to parody the very concept of verbal war by rendering it visual. This political cartoon creates a space for various party leaders who are engaged in a tongue fight, as a visual manifestation of verbal aggression, aggression generally synonymous with heroism. It almost appears as if snakes are pissing out there long and poisonous tongue to sting their enemy. That's true for how much venom is generally vomited in political speeches, especially during election campaigns, throwing in air all norms of civility in politics.

(g) Musical Strategy: How can music lag behind when it comes to creating political amusement for both of its general as well as its specialized viewers. Music reduces the magnitude of intense political issues, as it lightens up the mood for its obsessive seekers. However, it also secretively leaves behind a political message under its euphonious tempo. Music enhances the gravity of a particular situation, for it garners an emotional response from its audience, wherein lies its politics. Not only situations, but it aggrandizes the value of a person against its unique backdrop. An example of this strategy showcases itself in a politoon called "When Modi Becomes Don". From the title that suggest, the famous Bollywood number from one of Shahrukh Khan's motion hits. However, this time it's not King Khan, who enjoys the ride of being at the top of the world but replacing him in the league is, Prime Minister Narendra Modi whose huge fan following perhaps make him realize that he is the best. Therefore, it makes us clear how music can be a political weapon for creating superior identities and cannot simply be attributed as politically innocent.

Politoons can go any far to inject humour in its creative space. Not able to compromise with its humorous element, it creates such farcical alternatives that leaves a memorable impression on the mind of the audience. By farcical alternatives, it means displaying an alternative source of humour.

Not only the productivity of animated cartoons is important for one to scrutinize the level of subjective manipulation, just to bring out the core humour, but it also becomes necessary to consider its reception in the receiver's domain. To quote from Janis Edward's *Political Cartoons in the 1988 Presidential Campaigns:*

> Political cartoons often provide us with a smile and a reflection on the nation's events; just as often they provoke anger and outrage.
>
> People react strongly to political cartoons. Periodically, a newspaper reader will castigate a cartoonist rendition of a public figure or situation, complaining about a lack of fairness or objectivity. (Edward 3)

That's true! for there could be no small reason behind the attack on non-conformist weekly magazine Charlie Hebdo on January 7, 2015, as a response to a number of controversial Muhammad cartoons it had published. Because the cartoonist have a tendency to "take potshots

at their targets, exaggerate their characteristics, and invent new incongruities" (Edward, 4), it is most likely that, the Islamic receiver's (of the above controversial French magazine) have fallen in what Stuart Hall calls the "oppositional position" Hall characterize this oppositional position when a viewer can understand the literal (denotative) and connotative sense of a message while decoding a communication in a entirely contrary way. This means that a receiver recognizes that the encoder's meaning is not the dominant meaning, or what was intended, but alters the message in his/her mind to fit an "alternative framework of reference". (Hall 173) Thus, reader's or viewer's social state has placed them in a directly oppositional relationship to the dominant index, and although they understand the intended meaning, they do not share the text's code and end up debunking it.

Yet this is invariably not true for in most cases politoon receivers categorically can fall both in dominant as well as negotiated positions. Dominant positions are the one where there is barely any misunderstanding between the sender and the receiver, because both the encoder and the decoder have the same cultural predilections. While negotiated position is a mixture of both accepting and rejecting element.

One can say that animated political cartoons are still better off than the editorial one's for its throbbing and palpable humour tends to dilute any negativity that otherwise emerges in muted caricatures. Politoons to the least can lend a grin, even on the face of the most grave man, in the capacity of an 'oppositional' decoder, thus carving a niche for itself in the most hardened mettle. That's the power and politics of its strategic representation!

Further if one gets to see through the prism of cultural politics of these political animated versions, one cannot skip the idea of cultural analyst Stuart Hall who advocates the case of Cultural Studies fairly well "as a body of theory generated by thinkers who regard the production of theoretical knowledge as political practice" (Barker 4)

This very well endorses the idea of politics, as it seems obvious that the kind of knowledge these animated cartoons possess, is not politically neutral but very well politically charged with ideological underpinnings, bent on the propagation of a chosen political group or controversy. It is because, these are spilled with the content of exaggeration, which generally tends to foreground one aspect while sidelining the other. Such is the power of exaggeration that

lends persuasive capacity, to impel the audience to accept their thoughts as legitimate and real. It becomes a model, a means of political propagation, highlighting the agenda of a chosen political party while undermining the motives of the others.

Politoon's excess of display and stimulation needs, fully brings it under the domain of cultural scrutiny. It is because the location of cultural studies is "global in relation to the local" (Barker, 2) which indicates how Cultural studies is not geographically specific to one country, nation or location but has its foothold everywhere and this large varsity enables us to study certain global cultures with its reflection into the local domain. It is in this capacity politoons can become a subject of cultural study for it not only brings global issues to the forum but also carries the local paradigms of representational politics within its foray. Examples can be from a global issue of terrorism to local issue of election of particular state or a nation.

This 'pragmatic turn' that cultural studies has witnessed in the last few years shows the paradigms how culture constructs and alters the experiences of human beings interfacing the pressure of day-to-day life, social web and power structure, an argument endorsed by a Cultural Studies Professor at University of Lucknow, Dr Ravendra Pratap Singh. This could probably imply how culture alters the same experience of witnessing any kind of narrative. This very well re-emphasizes the history of code-switching from print to animated politoons, as an improvised version of models of political propaganda.

Being a "multi-or post-disciplinary field of inquiry that blurs the boundaries between itself and the subjects" (Barker 3), cultural studies has thereby opened a wide gamut of multi-faceted inquiry into the science of politoon making. As it involves a plural study of visual or television science, semiotics, psychology, history, political and social background, religious leanings etc. The above evidence immediately leaves no signs of "demarcation between itself and the subject" (3) of its study which only indicates how the study of political cartoon is not isolated from its cultural aspect. Cultural aspect includes every discipline that shapes the cultural mindset of the artists engaged in making political cartoons. What Janis L. Edward shares in is his book *Political Cartoons in the 1988 Presidential Campaign:*

W.A Coupe referred editorial cartoon as occupying a 'no man's land'. This idea is sustained by the observation that no one particular academic discipline owns cartoon

research. What limited critical research there is comes from history, sociology, art theory, political science and, more recently communication and media studies. (Edward xi)

Political cartoons therefore come within the paradigm of Cultural Studies, for its representation is inevitably linked with relations of power and consequences of such power structure, thus explicating media's role in cultural and political formation of the country.

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