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## ***Play in Manjit Bawa's Art***

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### **Abstract**

*Manjit Bawa remains an imposing influence on the canon of Indian painting. His sharp colours, distorted shapes and nightmarish landscapes not only revised styles but also methods of political response. His distortions seem to allegorize narratives of violence he is able to internalize. This paper seeks to explain these artistic choices in terms of play, irony and artistic self-awareness, thus trying to theorize his responses to late twentieth century violence in prominent North Indian states, especially when read against his apparently apolitical stance toward his own art. The paper attempts to read his work as a committed reaction to problems of representation, play and colour. For instance he gives up on realism and recognizability. Such a movement in his work may be read as a shift against play for the sake of stylized play and a gesture toward a more responsible satiric contemplation of collective guilt. Thus, his 'fabulism' becomes an instrument of castigation and not an end in itself.*

***Keywords: play, fabulism, colour, violence, visuality, self-awareness***

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Manjit Bawa and Shashi Tharoor should be forced together in analysis only to arrive at their dissonance from each other in intent and medium. Tharoor's use of parody, the emphatic unreliability of his narrator, and the delight in dream sequences imbue his text with play. However, his imposition of family history onto national history attempts a life writing of the nation: an endeavour that has already been complicated by Rushdie and Marquez. This paper explores irony and play through fabulism in Manjit Bawa's paintings. Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* is briefly discussed in order to allow a point of entry into fabulism and irony. The paper is meant to elaborate on the self-conscious, ironic use of motifs and iconography in twentieth century visual art. Tharoor's investment in self-aware narratives is thereby relevant. When Tharoor claims that *The Great Indian Novel* is not a 'novel', one asks how Tharoor defines a novel. If the novel is assumed to be nineteenth century realist then a negotiation of Bildung, omniscient third person narrator, the revelation of economics and the market, and the relationship of the protagonist with the Nation should dominate the text. It is interesting that most of these ideas are displayed in Tharoor's reappropriation of the Mahabharata in his fabulist tone. The obvious question therefor becomes: why the claim for it not to be a 'novel'?

One response to this question would be to say Tharoor desires play for the sake of play. In other words Tharoor enjoys the playful engagement with his reader and one method to do so is the display of self-consciousness of the composition and reading of the text. Which prompts the question both in Bawa and Tharoor- where does play take us? Further, where should it take us? Can play be an adequate motive for a progressive, radical critique of twentieth century Indian responses to myth? Bawa's work illuminates some of these questions.

Bawa frequently chooses to not title his paintings. This becomes significant because the possibility of icons being misread or overread is heightened. The debate that is sparked by the blue bodied flute playing individual exposes this possibility. In an interview with Marcella Sirhandi, he reacts to this possibility saying "The dog is anti-Hindu and anti-Muslim both. Showing the dog is anti-religion. When critics ask how I could make this painting insulting Krishna, I say it's not Krishna, it's Ranja" ("Manipulating Cultural Idioms", 1999). This is of interest because of the care with which he chooses his words. As he says 'anti religion' he refuses the terms of the debate and apparently does not give in to a simplistic binary of Hindu against Muslim. At the same time he not only invokes the Hindu Muslim debate, hence contextualizing his response, but as he mentions Ranjha he attempts to bring together disparate contexts of violence: Ranjha is a folk character restricted to a locale. Ranjha and Krishna are similar in the woodland ambience and the affective love that they are associated with. However as stories they bring attention to different regions and ideas. No doubt, communal violence in the case of Ranjha and anxiety of succession in the case of Krishna imply differing motivations of violence and different effects of violence. Bawa's technique of confusing the two may confuse the contextual differences between the two and thus dissolve them. The visual pun may be both dangerous and reductive.

The dissolution of differences stems from or leads to a misreading of the icon. His technique makes it clear that that an icon-ic polysemy is intentional. Bawa seems to court the controversy of iconological discomfort. As his response to the Krishna-Ranjha question shows he turns the polysemy into a spectacle. This demonstrates Bawa's control over meaning around his work. Such an intention, I argue, extends to an intentional use of fabulism. Bawa's concern with colour, shape, gesture and drapery emphasizes the fabular as his figures are heavily stylized. Much like Realism, Fabulism remains a contested term. It may accommodate a self-sustaining world of the fable (in so far as the fabular is sharply different from the verifiably real), and it may be a metaphoric expression of the sur-real, or the super real. Sumathi Ramaswamy responds to the 'imaginative geographies' of Said and suggests that the fabular as a treatment of subject is a site for fantasies about a historically treated topos ("History at Land's End", 2000). Pierce on the other hand would argue for the inevitability of the fabular to hold the real up ("Fabulously Real", 2004). Both assume that in analysis the fabular can be shown to work towards or for an effect of the real. Criticism around the use of the fabular or fantastic in Bawa has spoken of the use of phantasmagoria to navigate the verifiably real ("An Appreciation", 2004 and "Poetry of Fantasy", 1992). These commentaries imply that the use of the fabular is intimately connected to the 'real'

and doing so assume Bawa's art to be a dystopian carnival literalizing his views on violence against the social fabric. Indeed this would bolster Pierce's conclusion of fabulism feeding into the real and adding to the accuracy of the effect of the real. I think it would do so at the cost of obscuring the play in his art. His figures are suspended in colour, devoid of any other detail that can help identify the context. The flatness of his colour is disturbed by gradations and careful use of white to give the impression of depth. It seems Bawa plays not just with content but also with appearance itself. The paintings I will discuss imagine their forms in a self-conscious manner that uses playful repetition and colour critically.

Here (Fig.1) the hands of the woman move to her eyes, framing her vision. It seems the woman is thinking about the act of looking. It remains unclear who the subject is, the woman or the cow and the identity of the subject is not clarified. There is clarity in the spatial arrangement of the figures, however. The legs of the human diverge from the legs of the animal while both bodies are joint at the hips. Both look in directions away from the viewer, and both show signs of discomfort but are unwilling to display it on their physiognomy. The human is deliberately positioned as if with a movable lower body and is costumed in Hindu mourning. The animal is bogged by the knot of flesh pinching it, stretching its skin in folds. It is tempting to read this as an invitation and injunction to the viewer to introspect on collective culpability of communal violence. These bodies refuse to show pain and yet steadfastly look away from each other forcing a triangle at the apex of which stands the viewer: it seems the viewer is responsible for their pain and its refusal. The human's gesture would dramatize this triangle. It is nonetheless undeniable that the gesture reminds the viewer of its status as a visual text accessible through the eye. Through bodily placement, there is a self-conscious challenge to and emphasis on vision.

Another work (Fig. 2) similarly holds the eye up for inspection but imagines it further. The fingers and hand movement is repeated here. The hands are used in various permutations in all his paintings, especially as a visual pun around the flautist hands. As in his other oils on canvas, the face is stylized. The eye make up, the painted lips, the arched threaded eyebrows, -and more obvious here- the furrowed drapery disabuse the notion of this being real. The neat refinement of cosmetic excess foregrounds the objectification of the human form and hence tries to reimagine the form as plastic: like a mannequin. Thus his figures play with appearances as there seems a turning away from realistically figurative representation towards a deliberate realistically plastic appearance. It is obviously unreal but realistically.

Speaking of repetition, one must navigate the regimentation of the circular in his hair, drapery, costume. The abnegation of straight lines leads to an abnegation of wholes. His curves gloss his field of representation in one technique, hence defamiliarizing known subjects and clouding the familiarization of unknown subjects. The headgear is part of his style and becomes a wig. This mimics the folds in the flourish of cloth or hair seen in paintings that invest mimetically in social identification of their subjects. Bawa makes obvious the rules of visual identification and difference- his subjects refuse to give up their locations as he forces them into repetitive clothes and hair. He parodies the flourish and

folds in the furrows. Plus his animals not only can change shape but renege recognisability in their bifurcated or tripartite structures. This shocks the viewer into reviewing shape and exposes the assembly of these animals as so many body parts arranged together.

While one can agree with Kulkarni on Bawa's monochromatic backgrounds-he chooses metaphysics to think of his backgrounds as representing the cosmos- yet these backgrounds only emphasize the irony that underpins his oeuvre ("Shades of Colour", 2012). In two particular ways does this monochromatic use work. One is the development of Bawa's style. Bawa is, in art criticism, accepted as an artist who uses colour peculiarly. The monochrome exists on the canvas in subtle gradations allowing the viewer to appreciate the mastery of the painter over colour. Secondly, the use of dramatic colour emphasizes and affixes the meaning of such a colour. As it is monochrome, the colour adds to the technique of *reductio ad absurdum* by literalizing a monological position over the content. This could be a move towards emphasizing the irony as it fashions and steers the content.

Lastly, as pointed out before the gradations seem to substitute depth. This is clear evidence of play or pastiche becoming mere surface play in term of technique. In Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 three dimensionality is simulated by the use of differential colour. The colourful play on the actual canvas may be read as only an expression of whimsical style. If so, the play ceases to be a potent political force but play for the sake of play. The use of oil on canvas, as Berger discusses in *Ways of Seeing*, emphasizes the appearance of the content, in effect objectifying it for visual consumption meant for a particular audience. Bawa's art, however, uses oil and its consequent objectification. By using colour and play it brings attention to the status of the painting as constructed art. Indeed perpetual allusions to the circus or carnival in shape and subject foreground Bawa's work as a performance of play. His works can be understood perhaps as a parody of a parody. He drives this home by ceaselessly painting trapeze artists and acrobats. He seems to countenance that perpetual play may lead nowhere and that a response to violence necessitates a jettisoning of play for the sake of play. But the mode he chooses is a play of play. This means he is not abandoning political motivations in his responses to contemporary social ruptures. Significantly, it means that the *appearance* is of play is intentional and can be read as a self-conscious control over the content.

Such a conception of Bawa as self-aware means the painter, the *author* of the art is neither dead nor only a conduit for a tissue of citations but an interested individual whose responsibility becomes important. This is in contradiction with the ambivalence that he evinces in his response to the Krishna-Ranjha question. It would seem there is a disconnect between the proposed idea- his art performing play responsibly- and his interview indulging in playful confusion irresponsibly. His journalistic pieces on the other hand speak of the consequences of violence that grips Delhi, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh after 1984. In fact his interview does not give up political responsibility either: he is guilty of simplified speculation (and not abnegation of political commitment) as a comparison between Krishna and Ranjha is more complex than he imagines. But his dedication to representing violence and his understanding of the relationship between art, violence and fabular is impeccable.

His agenda is to forward the effects of violence on the human body and he does so by reimagining the physicality of his creatures as recombined or reconfigured as if after a traumatic experience. More importantly, the simplification inherent in the Krishna-Ranjha collapse must be read alongside the simplification evident in the furrows, hands and clothes in his oeuvre. The method of *reductio ad absurdum* demands the reduction of complex ideas into easily understood and rhetorically treated pieces of argument and this is visible in all his work.

The performance of play is a useful idea as it helps us understand his reappropriation of Krishna. It is difficult to speak of Krishna without also referring to the cosmic play that Krishna is the pivot of ie *leela*. This is not to say that the self-conscious play that we have spoken about is similar to Krishna *leela*. For instance Krishna *leela* requires a cosmic delusion in all its participants except Krishna while play tries to use this delusion yet asserts that it is play. *Leela* and play are comparable for both assume immense managerial ability on the part of Krishna or Bawa: an ability that is made visible, ironically, in his work on Krishna. Gilbert and Mildred Archer speak of the interpolations of Krishna Bhakti in myths around Krishna as cowherd ("The Loves of Krishna in Indian Painting and Poetry", N.d.). The most noteworthy aspect of the Archers' explanation of Krishna *leela* is the narrative control over time that Krishna evinces- the *gopis* return home not having been missed. Bawa is responsible for a similar control by temporally suspending his figures in swathes of colour. Bawa is able to construct an imaginative geography, a space that clearly takes from the reality outside of the canvas, but in its curvilinear figures, exists parallel to verifiable empirical reality.

The joke about Krishna's upper torso suspended midair (Fig.3) over a cow tells the viewer that Krishna is whole and incomplete at the same time, recognizable but concealed. In which case, what constitutes recognition? This is a question Bawa's art poses for the viewer throughout. His answer is iconography, a narrative of intervention in icons. In fact his work on Krishna incessantly refers to Krishna's use as icon, and through that refers to Krishna as director of the spectacle of *leela*, especially in the conspicuous absence of the *gopis* in his oeuvre. As I pointed out, it is fruitful to imagine the appropriation of this directorial capability by Bawa himself; to imagine Bawa as the mover of spectacles. For the Archers, Krishna manages the narratives of the *gopis* but in Bawa's work, Bawa ignores the *gopis* and attempts to manage Krishna.

The Hiranyakashyap piece (Fig. 4) for instance makes ironic use of iconography to reveal the tight hold the painterly consciousness has over the painting. This piece arrogantly announces the possibility available to a painter. If *La Pieta* holds the damaged body of Christ up for lamentation this piece changes that by not illustrating the lamentation. There is only an allusion to *Pieta*. Moreover, instead of Narsimha, part man part lion, mauling Hiranyakashyap's body it is Hiranyakashyap who serenely replaces Narsimha while the blue bodied individual reposes on his lap. Again, there is a powerful allusion to the Narsimha. Secondly, Hiranyakashyap's hands repeat the flute player's movements. They could also be playing the piano or even tickling the blue body but do not in any case attempt to maul it.

Thirdly, the facial similarity to Bawa's self-representation elsewhere is unmistakable. While there are clear playful allusions, the terms on which Bawa revisits these icons does not change: colour and curve are being used here as in other paintings. The painter's possibility is expressed and curtailed in the predominance of blue- the painter can only play with colours available, or with deities available (the many blue hues of the deity), but cannot forget the omnipresent influence of the deity. Blue god dominates and luxuriates in the blue background. The painting makes clear the process of self-discipline and at the same time asks viewers discreetly to speculate on iconicity. Hence, he 'attempts' to manage Krishna but performs his failure in doing so, despite the ironic iconography.

If it is argued that Bawa's hold over his work is tight, one must spend a little time discussing the intent of his work. Given that he uses play we should consider the intent in a matrix of laughter and discipline. It is possible that Bawa is visualizing surveillance or that he himself is part of a project of surveillance. The surveillance of the proportionate body as exemplified in fiction that engages with the grotesque would be a case in point. As discussed for figures 1 and 2, his self-reflexive fables foreground visuality as an organizing principle and in the Hiranyakashyap piece there is self-surveillance in self-portraiture. Therefore, Bawa seems to engage in an enterprise of moral surveillance through visual technique. The more obvious disciplining whether through Aristotelian laughter or Freudian laughter assumes social cohesion as the result of laughter and inevitably relates comedy with violence. This reading would imagine Bawa to be using painting for ideological purposes: by painting the fantastic consequences violence he is surveying and castigating his viewers. It is hence not difficult to imagine the role play/comedy/parody/irony play in this representation of violence. Bawa does not undercut *leela* and disciplines in the wake of satirists like Swift, hence the *reductio ad absurdum*. In conclusion, play for the sake of play is impossible. The self-consciousness that play implies seems to reinscribe the author as source of meaning and as someone with the cultural capital to engineer play. Defamiliarization can also re familiarize and for Bawa this leads to a self-righteous enterprise of disciplining his audience.

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**Fig-1: Bawa, Manjit, Untitled, N.d, oil on canvas. Plate 11.**



**Fig- 2: Bawa, Manjit, Untitled, N.d, oil on canvas. Plate 12.**



**Fig-3: Bawa, Manjit, Untitled, N.d., oil on canvas. Plate 17.**





**Fig-4: Bawa, Manjit, Untitled, N.d., oil on canvas. Plate 40.**

