

Representations of Street-Life in the Art and Literature of Bhupen Khakhar

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Abstract

This paper seeks to examine the works of the artist Bhupen Khakhar (1934-2003), a leading figure in Indian Contemporary Art. I will look at six paintings, one play and one short story to provide an overview of the way in which Khakhar deploys street-life, the ordinary and the mundane to attempt a demystification of the artistic process. Khakhar picks up snippets of everyday life, mainly from erstwhile Bombay where he grew up, and renders them as worthy subjects of art. He redefines the meaning of 'pop art' and brings the so-called 'insignificant' into artistic focus. In other words, art is removed from its intellectualised, elitist domain into one that is accessible and relatable. Through this process, he questions rigid definitions of art as well as literature and introduces multiple perspectives into the accepted, established canon. According to him, art needs to move away from the abstract and aim to represent the common milieu or the

actual inhabited locale. Similarly, in his short story *Maganbhai's Glue* and his play *Maujila Manilal*, he deliberately places into focus the 'common man' as hero/protagonist and thereby carries on the demystification process that began with his paintings.

This paper will thus analyse Khakhar's literary and artistic works in the light of his subversion of traditional canons and the exploration of modern Indian identity through a new, innovative artistic method.

Keywords

Indian contemporary art, Bhupen Khakhar, short story, play, pop art, Bombay street life, modern art

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When one talks of the popular or its more contemporary version, 'pop' art, it is easy to problematize such terms. If the definition of 'pop art' includes a certain degree of commercialization, accessibility and ubiquitousness, it would be interesting to determine the subjects that would remove art from its usual pedestal and from the accepted canons of so-called good taste and sophistication. Bhupen Khakhar is located at the centre of these debates. As Geeta Kapur points out:

Bhupen finds on his canvas a place for the insignificant man: a place that is so much like his actual environment that the subject will not feel alien in it. And by giving him

this place in a work of art, he enthrones the insignificant man in our imagination. (qtd in Hyman 41)

The purpose of this paper is to contextualise the art and literature of Bhupen Khakhar, and specifically focus on the manner in which the 'insignificant man' and provincial, everyday city life is represented. While it would be simplistic to say that Khakhar succeeds in popularizing his art, this question can be examined through the way in which he constantly tries to break away from the elitist conceptualisation of art. Dalmia traces this new idiom of art to the period post- 1970's where art sought to shed itself of mysticism (4).

If art is to be removed from its pedestal, perhaps a demystification of subject matter needs to take place. What Khakhar seeks to do is localise his art, focus on the provincial, everyday environment and represent urbanised, middle-class life. The hero or heroine of a Khakhar painting might be seen walking on the street, or perhaps in the very teeming Bombay bazaars that the artist himself grew up in. The life of such people is described, both pictorially in his paintings and verbally in his writing with a certain amount of intimacy and identification. This is seen not only in subject matter, which focuses on the street and common man but also in form and method- which consists of great detailing and juxtaposing of multiple microcosmic lives within the main narrative; whether it be a painting or a short story. The canvas of his art is vast and noticeable in its density. It has

the capacity to accommodate a varied mass of narratives and meta- narratives, a reflection of the immense variety within the city life that he attempts to portray. Khakhar makes a genuine effort to break free of circumscribed moulds of elitist art. While looking at a painting, one's senses are assaulted by a profusion of images and these images do not necessarily always conform to conventional notions of aestheticism. The "ultimate goal of the artist", according to him, is to portray "human beings in their local environment, climate, provincial society (Hyman 78)."

However, it is problematic to take any artist's aims at face value and it would be worth examining the extent to which Khakhar actually manages to challenge traditional and conventional notions of art. If popular and pop art can be linked to simple, unsophisticated subjects, his paintings do not always fall within this paradigm. As will be discussed within the paintings themselves, the mundane, everyday themes in his art are often interspersed with fantastical elements and a transcendental, mystical quality which may not be intended to be accessible to the ordinary, average viewer. To quote Khakhar in Hyman's book:

Working on a painting for three months will prepare a background for the exalted state to arrive....Spirit dominates so as to melt physical existence. (qtd in Hyman 67)

If this statement is taken into account, art can have a mysterious, spiritual dimension and become the means towards the attainment of an 'exalted state' or a moment

of epiphany which would obviously rise above mundane realities. A discussion of his paintings might clarify these themes further.

The painting *Factory Strike* (Fig. 1.) gives “the general sense of a mechanised steel- and- plastic world (Hyman 43).” It portrays an eternal social conflict- that between the wealthy classes and the working population. Contrasting discourses are set up together. On one side stand a truck and a bicycle, on the other, a chauffeured limousine for which the managers are waiting. The dress of the strikers is designed to highlight their social status, much as is that of the managers. If they are wearing vests and shorts, the polished and business- like look of the other two’s garments is visible even at a distance. Thus far, Khakhar sets up contrasting value systems at variance with each other. A further dimension is added when one looks at the figure right in front, who is neither part of the workers’ group, nor the managers’, but appears to be simply a bystander in the proceedings.

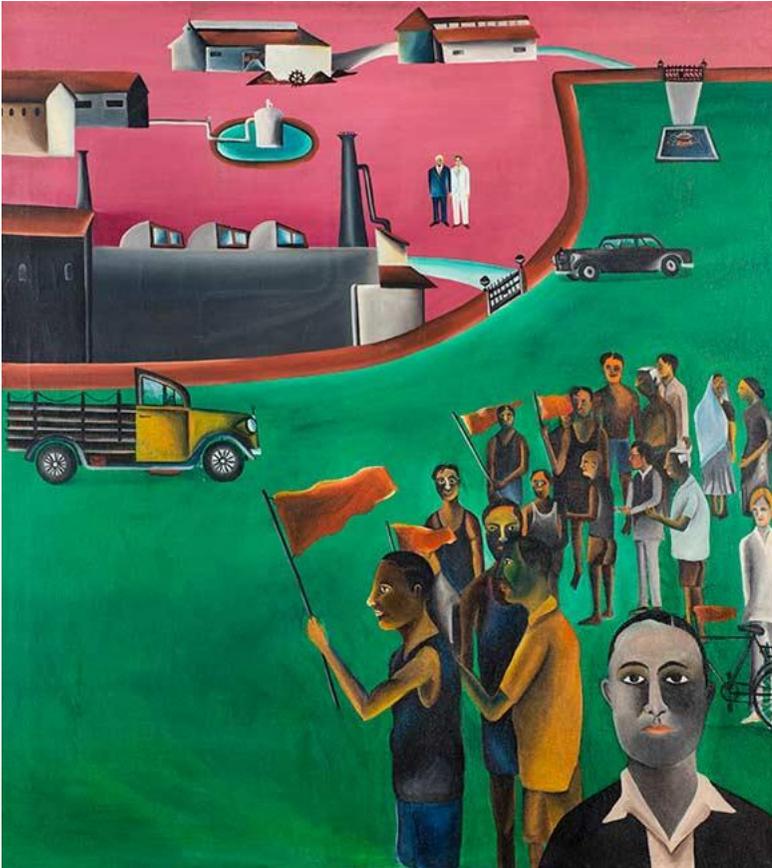


Figure 1: Khakhar, Bhupen. Factory Strike. 1972. Tate Modern, London. Tate. Web. Accessed on April 12, 2017.

Perhaps he may not even be read as a bystander, since he is looking at neither party, but somewhere beyond and is thus separate from the crowd. The clothes he is wearing are characteristic of neither social group, but somewhere in the middle- reflecting middle class aspirations towards upward social mobility. Just like in Khakhar's literature, this hero represents the myriad nature of the city, and its

multiplicity. His guileless, innocent, somewhat bewildered look links him to the ordinary street walker who has happened to stumble onto an interesting scene, thus making him identifiable. He also combines multiple discourses within himself by incorporating elements of both social groups. This reflects the fragmentation within city life that the artist tries to capture and the conflicting forces at play.

Khakhar's powers of observation and his keenness to represent street life in all intimacy and identification led him to sit behind the counter next to the shopkeepers in the local bazaars of Bombay and Baroda that he grew up in. His characters were, therefore, uncouth and hardly the accepted subjects for occupying places in an artistic composition. The subject matter of *Janata Watch Repairing* (Fig. 2.), for instance, represents street life at its most ordinary, mundane and everyday. The hero of the painting is, first of all, seen on a typical day in his regular routine. Aside from that, the expression on his face is worth noticing- an expression which, like that of the protagonist's in *Factory Strike*, is obvious in its simplicity and naïveté. He is clearly untutored and the subject matter of the painting thus becomes linked to the commercial transactions of a regular marketplace. With its leanings towards popular or rather, pop art, *Janata Watch Repairing* puts forth a statement- that everything can be a subject for art; its so- called sanctity is questioned through these paradigms.



Figure 2: Khakhar, Bhupen. *Janata Watch Repairing*. 1972. Tate Modern, London. Chemould Gallery. Web. Accessed on April 13, 2017.

If *Janata Watch Repairing* seeks to dismantle the accepted canon of good art and introduce the ‘vulgar’ subject, *Man Eating Jalebee* (Fig. 3.) tries to take this project even further. The painting seems to be designed to privilege the vulgar or the streetside man. This in both Bhupen’s painting and literature becomes a means to demystify the subject and make him or her all the more identifiable with

the viewing audience. The foreground figure eats jalebees with a disarming awkwardness and his childlike demeanour is intended to evoke humour. The way he is physically painted is hardly proportionate, with huge hands and uncertain skin colouring.



Figure 3: Man Eating Jalebee. 1974. Tate Modern, London. Chemould Gallery. Web. Accessed on April 12, 2017.

However, the provincial subject is not necessarily the only theme in a Khakhar painting, albeit a predominant one. To

further examine *Man Eating Jalebee*, one notices the juxtaposition of two completely different landscapes. In the foreground, the scene is that of a restaurant or a Bombay eating house, but the background is almost a landscape of fantasy. There is an element of mystery, vastness and depth in the sea behind the man. There is a lone sailor sailing on a ship which adds to the sense of loneliness and isolation. It is even debatable whether the seascape is real or simply a fantasy or dream of escape that the man is experiencing as he eats. Khakhar thus combines the mundane with the ethereal. This then raises a question- to what extent is his art provincial and everyday, as he claims? This theme can be examined further through another painting, which is, *Man with Bouquet of Plastic Flowers* (Fig. 4).

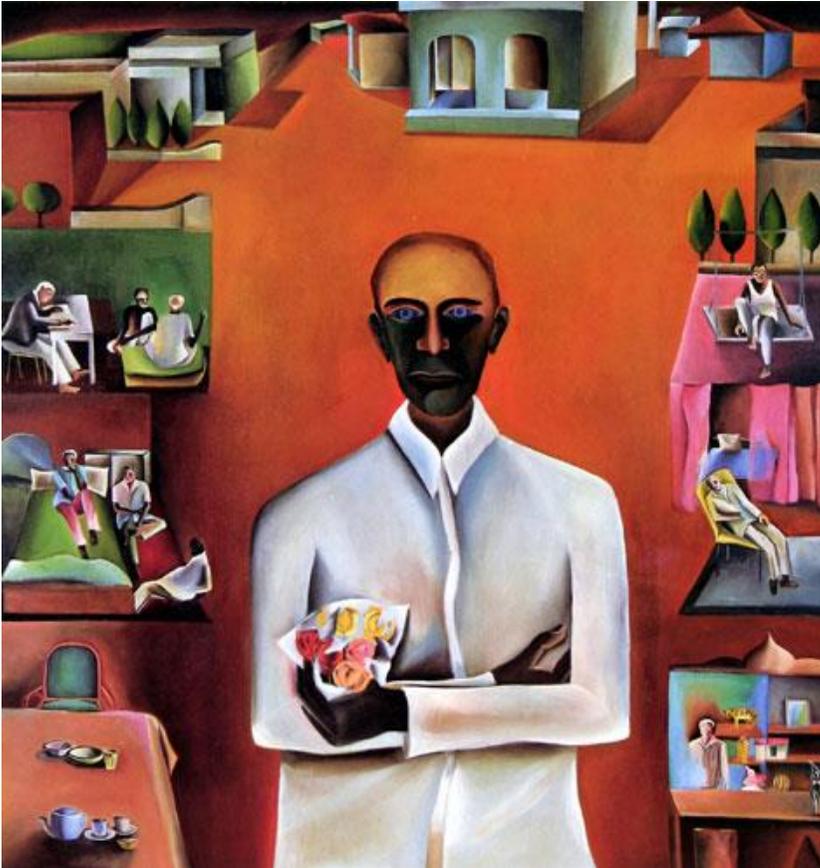


Figure 4: Khakhar, Bhupen. Man with Bouquet of Plastic Flowers. 1976. National Gallery of Modern Art. Delhi. Bhupen Khakhar Collection. Web. Accessed on April 12, 2017.

This painting combines various art forms. It is constructed along the lines of an inspirational poster, where the central figure of a reformer or guru is surrounded by episodes from his life. However, this method is used as a subversion technique because the piece of art is 'vulgarised'. The scenes depicted are not divine ones of

miracles and suchlike, but humdrum, everyday ones, showing the subject in ordinary activities, such as lounging on a swing or sofa, conversing with friends and so on. Khakhar uses ubiquitous materials and backgrounds for his paintings- plastic, and fluorescent colours. Having said this, however, it would be problematic to say that Khakhar represents simply the world of the mundane. Evident in this painting is a profound sense of pessimism to the point of existentialism. The figure in the foreground is not just huge but surreal, with a death- like expression which creates a sense of deep unease in the viewer. This zombie-like figure is what Geeta Kapur calls “the enshrined dummy of a man gone mad (Hyman 48).” Depictions are thus also of ‘madness’, of a subject who is disjunct from everyday society. If Khakhar intends to represent so-called normality, he also puts in the inexplicable, the dark and mysterious and what some people might call ‘abnormal’. This kind of a mystical, fantastical quality does not necessarily contribute to the popularizing of his art. Furthermore, the tiny scenes and overlapping discourses in this composition could also be the artist’s way of portraying multiple narratives within the city and myriad perceptions of reality.

Road Building at Kalka (Fig. 5.), at first glance, seems to be quite near to the style of popular painting, simply because of the subject matter. The heroes are labouring men at work and the scene is what one might view as a passer-by in any street in Baroda. However, yet again a

transcendental quality is introduced through the ethereal landscape in the background. The artist focuses the attention of the viewer on both scenes equally. Just as in *Factory Strike*, there are myriad narratives and the juxtaposition of varied points of view in this painting. The mystical quality and surreal colouring of the landscape beyond merges with a detailed rendering of the workers' lives, or the routine of the labouring classes. There is no fixed perspective and the viewer's gaze is intended to shift back and forth between both scenes.



Figure 5: Khakhar, Bhupen. Road Building at Kalka. 1984. Tate Modern, London. Chemould Gallery. Web. Accessed on April 13, 2017.

The demystification of art talked about earlier is fairly evident in *The Celebration of Guru Jayanti* (Fig. 6.). This is where Khakhar again combines the divine with the everyday. However, this is one of the paintings where he succeeds in subverting the canonical conceptualisation of good art, simply by way of the focus of the painting. The subject matter might be the religious celebration of Guru

Jayanti, but the viewer is certainly not allowed to look at this as a religious piece of work. The focus, instead, is on the heterogeneous crowd and not very aesthetically pleasing at that. The devotees of the Guru, according to Chaitanya “form only a small group in the bottom left and none of them seem particularly devout.” He adds that the painting reflects the variegated world of ordinary people such as lanes, rows of houses, labourers, a tailor working in his shop. It covers a wide spectrum or panorama of society, especially the common masses. The subject, therefore, is not divinity but the inconsequential crowd.



Figure 6: Khakhar, Bhupen. The Celebration of Guru Jayanti. 1980. Bhupen Khakhar Collection. Web. Accessed on April 13, 2017.

More so than his art, the word 'demystification' takes on further dimensions when one examines his collection of short stories and plays. The second section of this paper will discuss the literature of Bhupen Khakhar, specifically concentrating on the play *Maujila Manilal* and the story *Maganbhai's Glue*. In *Maujila Manilal*, there is a deliberate address to a middle-class urban audience. The hero Manilal combines various themes and issues- he represents a kind of kitsch and an artistic subject who belongs to everybody, is not separate but is identified with the crowd. He is not set apart even by physical appearance. Quite on the contrary, he is middle-aged and the only charms he can boast of are well-oiled hair and a slick ability to seduce women using Romantic English poetry. Khakhar seems to take great pains not to satirize his hero or even treat him as an instrument of critique. In other words, he avoids taking any kind of controversial stance at all. Humour in this play is not used to satirize or mock, at least when one speaks about the hero; rather, it is used as a deliberate means to demystify. If Manilal is used as an instrument to further any purpose, it is this and also to highlight the insignificant, street man in a way that Khakhar admits is not even possible through painting.

How is he used as an instrument at all? Primarily through the fact that he becomes a kind of caricature of Krishna; who belongs to the 'gopis' and is one religious symbol who is identifiable and 'realistic'. Krishna is not raised on a pedestal in religious and literary mythology but combines facets of both the human and the divine. What is

emphasized, however, is his 'humanness', his mischief and the fact that he is often linked with domesticized village life. By caricaturing Manilal in the form of Krishna, Khakhar achieves a dual purpose- he removes Krishna or divinity from his pedestal and underlines the point that even Gods are essentially human. Further, he emphasizes the humanness of Manilal, and the sense of his being part of every single aspect described of life in a middle-class urban setting.

Another example of demystification is if one shifts focus from the protagonist, Manilal, to other relatively minor characters. One such character is Jagdeep who is used as an instrument to further this technique. In an encounter with Yamraj in Hell in Act II Scene iii, one notices not just the action of the scene but more importantly, the tone in which it is set. The scene in Hell is constructed by way of a conversational tone, and what Khakhar focuses on is the ordinariness of the Gods. Far removed from the elevated, wise language normally associated with divinity, it assumes the quality of light banter. Even more evident than this is the central action of the scene which is the Gods gambling through a game of dice. The decision of whether the victim will occupy Heaven or Hell is a game entirely based on luck. This scene is only one example from a play which is conspicuous for its complete lack of a moral stance. In his representations of the urbanised subject, Bhupen introduces multiple narratives and contesting truths. He portrays urban and city life as essentially fragmented, without any stable, fixed point,

and one single, unified truth. There is no particular value-system that is being upheld by the city dwellers and not particularly any principle of morality, whether by the 'humans' in the play or the 'Gods', if after all they are to be seen as different. Jagdeep's comment highlights this profound dilemma. On learning about the game of dice, the following dialogue takes place.

Jagdeep: Then what about natural justice...What is the Truth? That means there's uncertainty here too... just like on Earth. What's the difference then?

Vishnu: The difference here is that you can see the dice. (174)¹

In other words, life is a game of luck. It is not always one's choices or moral principles that determine consequences.

An urban household with all its vicissitudes is the setting of *Maujila Manilal*. If one is to talk about mundane events and domesticity, an adequate portrait is provided in the play through the characters of Savita and Sharmishtha. Interspersed with cooking scenes and stereotypical women's subjects of conversation is the play's treatment of love. Love in the modernised city is not transcendental or Romantic, but a concept that is highly problematized in this play. The extra-marital affairs of the two women with Manilal are examined through multiple perspectives and there is no exercise of moral judgement. If the affair is looked at through the eyes of the stereotypical jealous

¹ Act II Scene v

husband, Navneet, it is also viewed through the detached, so-called ethereal gaze of Ranchod. He refers to himself as a “lover of the spirit” who has “lost all desires of the flesh (139).”² He thus attributes Savita’s liaison to destiny or perhaps God’s will. There is no one reaction that is upheld by Khakhar. It might be a gentle satirizing of the hollow, deluded nature of such spirituality as Ranchod stands for, but it also mocks at Navneet’s violence and makes the cuckolded husband a comic figure. But Bhupen’s concern seems to be to show the myriad lives and events within the city, and the rather identifiable figure of the everyday hero and heroine. His purpose, further, is to stress that there is no one transcendental principle of morality in the city and each event can be viewed in the light of multiple perspectives.

The short story *Maganbhai’s Glue* does not necessarily fit into the standard formula of the design of a short story as outlined by Ian Reid. The plot is somewhat sketchy, choosing to describe a series of comic situations rather than any kind of development, and what Reid calls ‘the moment of crisis’ or epiphany is a somewhat disconnected homosexual act of love at the end. The plot and the resolution, thus, do not follow any particular kind of symmetry but its aim seems to be simply to describe a situation or a way of living. The story introduces its setting and subject right from the first page. The backdrop is Makarpur industrial estate and its surrounding areas.

² Act I Scene v

Khakhar introduces not just the setting but also firmly locates his heroes in a particular class and milieu. The narrator drives a scooter and is accosted by a stranger next to the office in which he works as an accountant. There are repeated references to the attire of the stranger, that is, dhoti- kurta, and to streetside addresses such as C-3 and C-12. All these details highlight the characters' class positions. Maganbhai as protagonist combines multiple strands. He is the aspiring inhabitant of the middle-class section of society who aims at social mobility. He dreams up outlandish schemes to realise this ambition and is thus made a target of the gentle yet ironic humour that is so characteristic of Khakhar. He, under no circumstances, fits into the concept of heroism that one might expect from classical or canonical literature. His ambitions might be realistic and adequately representative of his class, but the means he uses to attain these are fantastic, to the point of being ridiculous. Maganbhai is a hero who is a kind of grotesque parody of the brilliant inventor or scientist whose mind teems with endlessly new ideas. More than a parody, the author creates a hero who is not only characterised by his essential 'humanness' but also capable of making mistakes, being indecisive, constantly changing his goals and schemes and barely ever learning from his errors and follies.

The humanness of the heroes and trivial, quotidian nature of the situation in *Maganbhai's Glue* is undercut by an element of what can almost be called magical realism. It is

not always 'reality' that is depicted in the work of Bhupen Khakhar but fantastical elements inevitably creep in. This is evident in Maganbhai's rhapsodic appreciation of the glue he is planning to commercialise.

This glue is so strong that if a drop spills on the floor and your finger touches that spot...either your finger has to be cut off or the tile removed from the floor. Did you know that Siamese twins exhibited on circuses are actually stuck together with this glue... (13)

As a reader, one may not believe these claims and might interpret them as simply a situation designed to create humour. However, one is soon disillusioned when this situation is actually proved as true later.

From the paintings and the literature that has been analysed, it becomes evident that while Bhupen Khakhar might contribute in a substantial way to the popular idiom and the genre of pop art, a question that should be asked here is- how far does he actually succeed in popularizing his art? His aim might be to show everyday reality, mundane, quotidian events, vulgar and identifiable subjects, but in doing so, it cannot be denied that he creates an alternative reality of his own. If his art, at least in select compositions, has a mystical, transcendent quality that might be described as fantasy, his literature questions the nature of reality itself. It also introduces the idea of contesting truths and the fragmentation of the self, such as in a painting like *Man with Bouquet of Plastic Flowers* and the disjunct lives of the characters in *Maujila*

Manlilal. It is questionable, then, whether the artist completely succeeds in departing from canonical assumptions and the pedestaling of so-called 'good' art, and dissociates himself from its elitism and 'unknowability'.

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