

Buddhadev Mukherjee composes: A slap on the cheeks of history from the top

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ABSTRACT: This essay is a reading of Buddhadev Mukherjee's figure compositions axled on a mode that is engaged as humour. By questioning this humour this essay moves on to think how this mode is a result of a hermeneutics based on a civilized eye in relation to a polite society that composes polite way of performing in public space that Mukherjee challenges.

Such a challenge opens up a critique of 'myth of progress' of modernity in relation to a metropolis that turns affectual relationship to abject. This essay aims to trace this abject through a cognitive function i.e., gaze that Mukherjee critiques through his figure compositions opening up a critique of a polite boundary in a metropolis showing a history from below.

KEYWORDS: *Affect, Alterity, Post-colonialism, Post-humanism, Decolonial/Anti-colonial studies.*

INTRODUCTION

In Buddhadev Mukherjee's figure composition 'Man XII', a hand raises a dictum pointing itself at a lying human being. The image unfolds a dialogue based between the hand and the sleeping corporeal body-subject creating a poesis of subalternity built on a language of discipline but is corporeal body-subject really

affectively listening? That is to ask; is body-subject aware of the hand? The human body reveals a certain kind of discipline, hands and legs stretched neatly and the head stiffened a little to stage as if discipline has been internalised but is it as a reaction due to an omnipresent hand that corporeal body-subject cannot see but always already is engaging? Does it fully provide us with a knowledge of whether corporeal body-subject is aware of the hand or not? If so, is it a dialogue or a relation based on negative dialectics?

The awareness that ‘Man XII’ unfolds a certain kind of realisation that opens up a question of an internalisation of a discipline further asking whether it is a willing internalisation — is it resulted by an awareness that someone is watching from a central tower i.e., a potentiality about a human being can be watched anytime — thus internalising a discipline becomes a process that further regulates their behaviour through which a certain kind of knowledge is formed. This knowledge churns an aesthetic of a corporeal body-subject that is a reaction produced by the work of disciplinary institutions which came up in the last couple of centuries.



Man XII by Buddhadev Mukherjee, Art Exposure Gallery

This hand provides an interesting queue to read Mukherjee's series '*Either you run the day or the day runs you*' a series of figure compositions where Mukherjee explores human beings in their daily chores. These chores are variedly engaged, sometimes making it clear what a person is engaging-in, other times little unclear, only made to engage as a walk, at another time these are festooned in a juxtaposition which for Mukherjee becomes an important technique for unfolding class structures of a metropolis. Often enough expression of a character is muted offering an un-potentiality to engage with a character completely. This un-potentiality ethically potentializes a restriction in configuring a location of a character that could have had unfolded a sympathetic gaze when read from a vantage point i.e., looking down by acknowledging an identity by staging such as a cultural identity – thereby restricting any scope of engaging about how a human being engages with a collective. These engagements as readings comes around in Mukherjee's figure compositions which may be understood by varied poetics. Mukherjee's figure compositions are sometimes quirky, then muted, often blank, situated within an interplay between dark and light colours making a reader ask oneself: How must I engage?

This question leads a reader to think of bodies as a site that at a first glance is engaged as humour but one ponders next why humour? To answer this, one turns to one's own systematic aesthetic/pedagogy that has trained an eye to be civilized framing another question: Is it humour to a civilized eye? There are questions but no easy answer as one engages with Mukherjee's figure compositions — only questions revealing failures of the hullabaloo of civilizing mission, the emancipation project. When the direction of historiography is changed— that is instead of from top to below one initiates a search from below to top— then we observe a turn within, i.e., how neo-colonial governmentality, and globalization have been successful failures.



Image 1. from the series Either you run the day or the day runs you by Buddhadev Mukherjee

Myth of progress: Working in a metropolis.

Mukherjee's figure compositions are caught in a movement. This movement is directed towards a horizon yet to be touched concocting a reactionary understanding to/of a metropolis where everything should always be on the move to unfold a condition about a behaviour that has developed in a metropolis, i.e. a movement that is designed by a progress based on a myth. This progress makes us think of Francois Lyotard's 'Postmodern Condition' as a question posed: What substantiates this progress based on a myth? our attention should be turned to a metropolis. Lyotard in the foreword of the now famous book¹ has written how a post-modern condition can only happen in a high society and a high society can never be out of a metropolis because a metropolis as engaged from a perspective of 'post' enlightenment/renaissance was festooned to give a tangibility to a staged progress. Jurgen

Habermas understood a metropolis, i.e. a space where Lyotard's postmodern condition is located as a space that is simply designed by what he called 'empirical-sciences' as opposed to 'empirical-analytical sciences' — a condition of skilled labour as a reaction of new science, humanities, civil-service in creating a new world that is plastic in its depth but glitters as gold.



Image 2. Either you run the day or the day runs you

The opening of a metropolis generated an understanding of skilled labour, and with the coming of new kind of jobs, social institutions, festooned in composing a polite society based on an upward mobility created a boundary within which discourses about discipline became a priority. The very construction of purity (within a polite society) then was a self-discursive understanding, a perspective that could potentially be realised by a gaze² offering hermeneutics based on discursive binary oppositions; polite/impolite, civilized/native, regional/global.

Mukherjee's figure compositions remind one of these boundaries very clearly particularly by an engagement of a metropolis that is a presence in absence. Mukherjee locates his characters in the foreground of a background, i.e. the background as a metropolis that becomes a presence in absence that is in a relation to the bodies composing this movement. This movement when read as a sign reminds us of Laurence Berlant's work 'Cruel Optimism.' Berlant defined a kind of optimism that is never ending. She had defined Cruel Optimism in these words:

Cruel optimism is when what you want is the very thing that's hurting you, but you can't let go because it also represents your dreams. (Berlant 2011)

Mukherjee's specific figure compositions offers themselves to be read by a perspective of 'cruel optimism' is unfolded by a forward movement. These movements happening within a spatiality of/under progress of a myth provides a critical queue to think of a history from below — Mukherjee engages in most of his images in unfolding a role of affect as a reaction to/within modernity. What kind of an affect is this? One realises how this very affect is not based on a reciprocation as ideated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, i.e. this affect is unlikely a relation based on reciprocation; rather it unfolds as an affect based on a dictum of subalternity that castigates human beings. i.e. a relation based on objectification, turning affect into abject.

Abject as understood by Julia Kristeva³ is neither a subject nor an object but something that is expelled from the self that disturbs identity, system and order. To think in these terms, one engages with an understanding about how Mukherjee's figure compositions are outside of this boundary and to locate them inside *the* boundary, must the bodies become a site of humour? This, then, engages us to think, at what cost humour arrives in the modern world. In seeking an answer to this question, one would be made to think of a technique that Mukherjee frequently uses in his work that is juxtaposition: a technique that one has engaged

enough in the works of the European surrealists.

LOCATING CHARACTERS INSIDE A DISCURSIVE PURITY: MEDDLING IN MODALITIES: JUXTAPOSITION IN A METROPOLIS

Mukherjee uses juxtaposition as a technique to engage with binaries that is a credo of a metropolis. A metropolis engages in a manichaeian view i.e., black/white, good/bad, ugly/beautiful modes of living that is always within and never out of a binary – flexing dictum from advertisements. A man with a gigantic fish is one of the images in a canvas that unfolds a relation of human being to labour. This relation from a Marxian perspective might make us engage with labour as ‘estranged’ unfolding a discursive understanding of supply to a demand, that alienates worker from work. The weight of the fish dismantles a balance opening up a queer space that is a non-normative way of performing in a public space; gazed by a civilized eye within a polite boundary might trigger a laughter and the civilized folks could be encountered laughing.



Image 3. A cut shot from Mukherjee's *Either you run the day or the day runs you*

One of the images unfolds a man holding a chisel on the move with a quirky smile on his face as another man is attached to a chisel framing an insistence to unfold the quirky smile (Refer to Image 3.) The quirky smile then becomes a self-expression that reveals a man not bothered by the unstable position of the Other – apparently exposing a rush under a myth of progress that reveals a kind of numbness of an affectual relationship in which the Other is seen as an object. The composition offers us to think how subalternity functions in layers unveiling the smile that also critiques a civilizing mission, at large, modernity.



Image 4. Either you run the day or the day runs you

In Image 4 a swimming pool is composed in which a human being is relaxing as the pool situated within a plate is being carried by another human being. The composition develops a dialogue with a potential understanding to a relation of subalternity that is based on the promise/as a reaction of/to modernity (Refer to Image 4. The composition on the right towards the bottom) On

one hand, we have a human-being carried by another human-being on a plate signifying a reactive action construing a space about a modern institution assembling the/within a myth of a modern life. On the other hand, it is through juxtaposition that Mukherjee composes a relation based on subalternity in this composition.

The action of the human being carrying the plate located within a modern institution, i.e. a human being at work as a binary opposition to a human being at leisure. Moreover, when this is located within the boundary of purity, one intends to turn towards a Marxist reading that would offer an interpretation of how urban spaces intensify capitalist exploitation, concentrating on wealth and labour while deepening class divides based on capital⁴.

It is this class division that is engaged through this image unfolding a relation based on subalternity; as ideated by Ranajit Guha as phenomenological — i.e., a relation out of which two voices are formed, the greatness of one voice over the other composes a subaltern voice⁵. The human being relaxing on the pool embodies a greater voice in relation to a sign i.e., leisure, compared to the man carrying a plate situated within a system designed by discipline⁶ looking to framed concepts shaping ‘transcendental’ as an ‘empirical.’

Performing Queer: Body as an Identity: Un-Locating a character: Mingling with Expression

The civilized class creates a boundary, everything one thinks as not-civilized is out of this boundary. In that way, to think of Mukherjee’s compositions as engaging in humour is a gaze of a civilized folk trying to keep their space free as an essential understanding of discipline. But when these corporealities are inside the boundary and as a result of it if their bodies become a site of critique of the civilizing mission, how does the single image function here?

A closer look would make us think of single images that do not engage in any kind of juxtaposition; to say, a man walking

unfolds Mukherjee's insistence to think away from a dialogue about critique of coloniality's/neo-colonialism's civilizing mission restricting an essential understanding of bodies outside of a boundary into becoming a cultural identity. Mukherjee attains this by engaging in single compositions to create a moment that has been engaged as a 'now' moment⁷ by the Phenomenologists, taken by Jacques Derrida following up a queue from Edmund Husserl to think of a moment when a corporeal body-subject engages in an encounter and how such a thought changes ontology to form a new epistemology (in other words living in praxis). Thoughts from a perspective of identity (sign that develops a hermeneutics) make us think of Derrida's idea that identities are never fixed. Such a thought provides us a queue to think of what is seen in the single images as a moment that Mukherjee records that was not *the* same in the bygone time and shall be not *the* same in the coming moment, and as so, this possibility of openness, if read as change remains/becomes a leitmotif for Mukherjee in composing single figures.

There is little scope in this essay to analyse why there is a bear in one of Mukherjee's canvases. What is an animal doing amidst humans in a metropolis? Is it an animal? Or can one develop a reading about how Mukherjee's composing of what is engaged as 'animal' serves as a potential reading of a 'transcendental', i.e. did Mukherjee compose a thought of a corporeality about *being-an-animal*? But attention to humour makes us think how, if it is humour — how this gaze is being composed from an eye that has been pedagogically civilized that otherwise can be engaged as realism. And when it is realism, then one is in an unethical engagement in a metropolis working within a wider framework of modernity that finds a place in Mukherjee's canvas.

This essay aimed to read Mukherjee's compositions from a perspective of humour in situating humour within a "deconstruction" method. Such a thought attempted to unfold how humour in Mukherjee's figure composition works as a mode



Image 5. Either you run the day or the day runs you

that can be read within a framework of realism. This realism unfolds as to how humour becomes a gaze to look at Mukherjee's compositions thereby posing a question: Who is looking? This 'who' engaging with humour unfolds a gaze situated within a framework of civilized class.

Notes:

1. See 'The Postmodern condition' by Francois Lyotard.
2. This essay attempts to read 'gaze' as one of the cognitive functions that provides a tangibility composing a discourse of politeness. Other cognitive functions can very well be engaged from a perspective of 'transcendental' shaping 'empirical' aspect of living.
3. See Julia Kristeva's 'Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection.'
4. Refer to Volume 2 of *Das Kapital* by Karl Marx.
5. An otherwise reading of this composition also unfolds how corporeality at work unfolds a regular functioning that also unfolds a possible potentiality

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to think of corporeality from a perspective of Berlant's 'cruel optimism.'

6. A Foucauldian perspective makes us think of how institutions develops a mode of affect (willing or unwilling) that shapes 'transcendental' (from a perspective of existential philosophy) shaping 'empirical.'
7. This moment comes up by Edmund Husserl's ideation of 'phenomenology' as science in his Zurich Lecture. This 'now' moment is a moment that is an encounter with 'a' world that develops a hermeneutic. To think about this from a perspective of identity makes us think how identity formation when thought from a perspective of 'transcendental' shaping 'empirical', i.e. 'being' to 'becoming' —how 'becoming' is dependent on a relation of self and the Other (I and what is not-I); when seen from a perspective of Mukherjee's single compositions, it makes us think how these single compositions catch a credo of a 'transcendental' time as opposed to a 'temporal' time that was not the same in the bygone moment and will not be the same in future horizon; possibility is based on an impossibility of a reduced hermeneutic.