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Illustrating Bijon Bhattacharya's *Nabanna*

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Bijon Bhattacharya's *Nabanna* was first performed on the 24th of October, 1944 in Calcutta's Sri Rangam Theatre under the direction of Shombhu Mitra. The play was acknowledged by critics because of its new vision; deviation from a theatre that was more Romantic in nature by adopting "true to life" (Samik Bandhopadhyay 7; translated) Realism; and its resistance to being focused on one dominant character. The play begins with the woes of Pradhan Samaddar but encompasses the lives of other characters like his nephews, Kunja and Niranjana; their wives Radhika and Binodini; his neighbour, Dayal and so on. It was through various individuals that the plight of the entire community was performed. It was also one of the most important productions of the 'Indian People's Theatre Association' in Bengal. However, Sudhi Pradhan notes that after its success, the quality of the production became more important than the idea it was trying to propagate and the new concerns were of "technical perfection" (257-58).

Though it has received acclaim, there were some, like Dilip Ray, who called it "... a type of melodrama ..." (131-32; translated) and disapproved of the employment of techniques of alienation which lead to a lack of fidelity to the cause. Romain Rolland calls melodrama as one of the types of people's drama. However, while Rolland's melodrama is targeted towards entertainment this was done for a certain kind of activism, to lay bare the



state of society during this man-made calamity. Interestingly, Chittaprosad Bhattacharya, a Marxist and a cartoonist, was also involved in activism through art and his sketches of the famine also show a wretched situation.

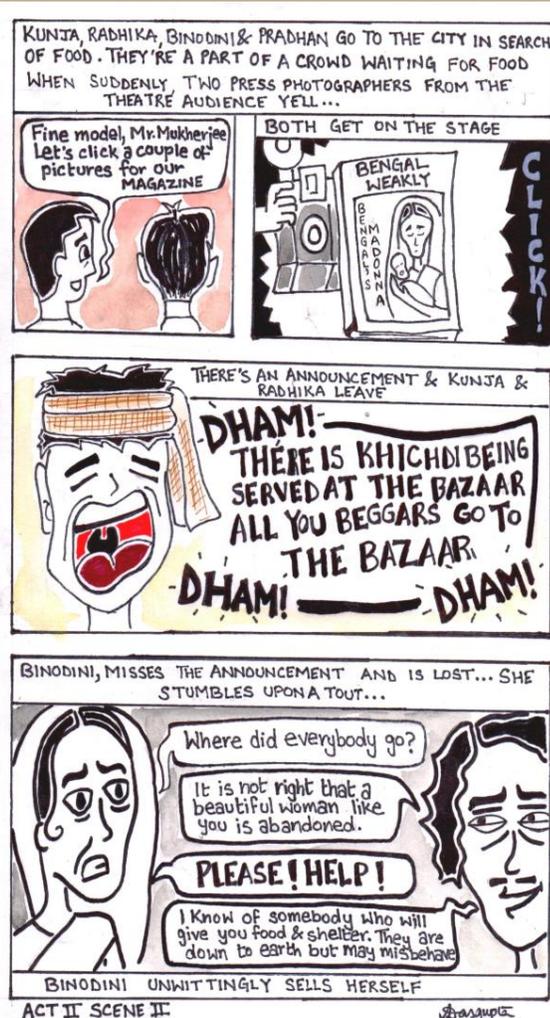
While a play is meant to be performed there are certain aspects of the theory of comics that intersect with (and also diverge from) the study of a performance. Will Eisner, in his book *Comics and Sequential Art*, suggest that every panel “. . . should be regarded as a stage . . .” (151) with respect to a deliberate composition, that is, of a deliberate putting in place. He also calls the comic a study of the body and the face, which is an essential part of performance also.





However, while the performance would see the body in motion and the facial expressions change in real time, the motion in a comic is arrested. For instance, in the first page of the given comic (made on cartridge sheets with water colours and marker pens), that is, act one, scene one, the panel in the middle of the page has Pradhan Sammadar's anguish frozen on the page. His reason for anguish is the death of his sons Shripati and Bhupati and also his own decision to destroy three bales of rice. The text does not mention why he destroys them but one can perhaps assume it is some sort of political ploy.







It is due to this nature of the comic being frozen in motion can one zoom in to illustrate a part of the scene, like Kunja's crawling towards Haru Datta's feet in act one, scene five (page 3) and the image of the handcuffed hands of Haru Datta and Kalidhan Dhara in act two, scene five (page 6). Eisner, also calls the cartoon as a "... form of Impressionism" (151). An impressionistic technique is explicitly used in act three, scene two (page 7). While



the text describes a nurse sitting in a dormitory full of patients ailing from malaria and malnutrition, I draw an overshadowing presence of a skeletal human and of a tangle of skinny arms reaching out for food/medicine. In the same page, the doctor is, at once, part of the



panel not a part of the panel, giving the page, what Eisner calls an “unlimited dimension” (52).

Adaptation, by nature, can never be absolute. While, I have tried to stay true to the text there are numerous omission of characters (like Pradhan’s wife, Panchanini, the neighbouring farmer, Dayal and so on) and scenes. The translation of the Fakir’s song also has an omission of one rhyming couplet. There is a personal intervention through additions and changes and it includes a certain use of a scheme of colours. Yellow and orange, in the



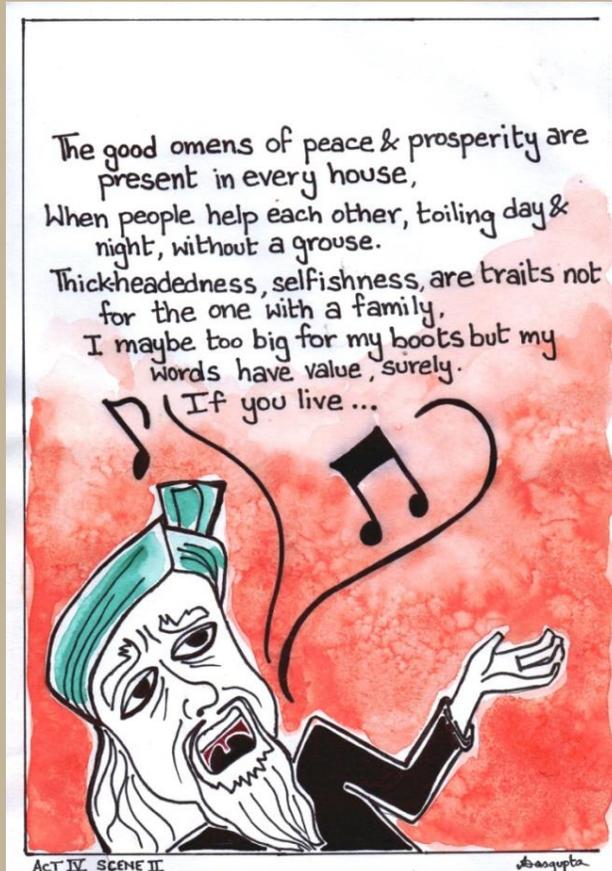
initial scene, indicates a fire of struggle and frustration; while the use of blue and black for panels with Kalidhan and Haru Datta not only indicates that they will beat anybody who crosses their path black and blue but also hints towards a miserable atmosphere. Act two, scene one (page 4) is completely grey to show the hopelessness of the transaction with the hoarder. The yellow, orange and green in the last four scenes are used to signify brightness and prosperity.

'If you live, so lives your family's name,'
Is a very false claim.
Hindu or Muslim, farmers should be friends
all the same.
There's no solution except this & that's the
essence of it.
If you don't educate yourself now, when will
you make sense of it.
Those who split even after understand-
ing this,
In six months will find themselves in
an abyss.
Know the tale of Jabbar Mincha from
Khalilpur, it is a tragic story,
He refused the love of his neighbours
and it was the reason for his
misery
Scores of farmers of yore,
Saw untimely, undocumented deaths
galore.

ACT IV SCENE II

Of the deaths of cows & calves, who keeps a track,
So many women & children, lost their lives in lakhs
Grooms' brides are lost to devastation & decay
But it is not abhorrent as long as they live to
see another day.
The child, the babe, the infant, in its thirst for
milk finds eternal rest,
The mother, gaunt & spectral, bleeds blood from
her breasts.
Without a loincloth, with a want of clothes,
The incapacity of the householder to serve modesty
arose.
In the mould of the living-dead are good people
cast
Death is in every house because of an involuntary
fast.
When the ripe crop goes to waste, tears are
shed,
Take on the situation with strength, it's all in
your head.
There is no point in chiding life,
Only through inner strength will you
survive.

ACT IV SCENE II



Another change is that in act two, scene two (page 5) the text describes how the unscrupulous photographers give the beggar woman false hope of food to get the perfect shot, however, I show a magazine that anticipates the sale of their photograph. I also end the comic with the song being sung by the fakir as it is suggestive of a use of a folk tradition and the song also sums up the message that the play seeks to convey. Apart from these obvious changes, the form itself is a change in the system of signification or meaning-making. Thus, though this comic is not a performance there is a similar sort of 'mise-en-scène' that is involved in the process of putting together text and image.



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