

‘This Is Not A Doll’: A Foucauldian Reading Of Bikash Bhattacharjee’s Doll Series

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Abstract

The Bengali painter Bikash Bhattacharjee depicted the everyday lives of middle-class Bengali people. Known for bringing realism in Indian paintings, he was also heavily inspired by the surrealist movement and cited Spanish surrealist artist Salvador Dali as one of his inspirations. The Surrealist movement and artworks focused on engaging the unconscious mind. It balanced the rational life of simple everyday objects with the uncanny and fantastical. The artworks transgressed boundaries. They liberated thought and language through unpredictable and unsettling imagery. Michel Foucault was interested in similar ideas, as he sought to reveal the instability of language and the relation of language with reality.

Centuries before the Surrealist movement, Bhartrihari presented similar ideas in his sphota theory. Bhartrihari’s sphota theory is the unifying principle that connects the word and the grammatical form with the meaning. Further development in Indian poetics was by Anandavardhana through the theory of Dhvani that indicated the role of suggestion or indirectness. The aim of this paper is to develop a theoretical and historical framework that contextualises parallels between Indian poetics and contemporary western criticism to develop a fresh understanding of the Doll series by Indian surrealist painter Bikash Bhattacharjee.

Keywords: Surrealism, Indian poetics, Meaning, Painting, Dhvani

1. Introduction

The meaning of visual arts is often relegated to visual rhetoric. Visuals are considered inherently referential, and the artist's perspective takes priority. This vein of interpretation has been questioned thoroughly for both written language as well as paintings particularly during the reign of the post-structuralists in the latter half of the 20th century. Paintings provide coherent meaning to the subjective mind through certain recognisable patterns that come together to create meaning using present and past contexts. Similarly (as established by grammarians ranging from Bhartrihari to Rousseau) words themselves carry no meaning unless placed in a certain context. For instance, Saussure thoroughly argues against words having inherent meaning. He uses two examples to highlight his point. The first involves the routine of a train. He mentions:

The 8.25 train is not a substance but a form, defined by its relations to other trains. Although we may be unable to conceive of the train except in its physical manifestations, its identity as a social and psychological fact is independent of those manifestations. Similarly, to take a case from the system of writing, one may write the letter t in numerous ways so long as one preserves its differential value. There is no positive substance which defines it; the principal requirement is that it be kept distinct from the other letters with which it might be confused, such as l, f, b, i, k. (Saussure, 1916). In both examples, the position of the signs in a larger linguistic context is what gives them relevance and meaning. Language plays a major role in imposing order and shaping our perception of reality (Storey, 2015, p.118).

Bhartrihari's *Sphota* theory interestingly refers to the sentence as latent unity. He talks about how linguistic convention does not lead to interpretation. Two people who share a language would not always end up with a similar comprehension. The reason they do not is due to the *sphota* that is already present in the hearer's awareness. For centuries, linguists have analyzed the interaction between senses and our minds in relation to meaning-making. In the earlier 20th century, several artists focused on this exploration of the mind and how the conscious mind interacts with the unconscious. They believed in the power of imagination and what can be found beyond literal understanding. They delved deeper into the world of dreams and unconscious visions. They were inspired by a post-Freudian desire to set the mind free. Karl Marx is said to have inspired the surrealists as they wished to reveal the contradictions ingrained in the rational world and bring about revolution. These ideas led to the Surrealist movement whose principal theorist was Andre Breton. Breton published his *First Manifesto of Surrealism* in 1924. The expressions of the movement transgress conventions and unsettle the mind, without leaving the realm of rational explanation. The focus is on establishing aberrations and indulge with uncanny and subtle elements. Such an idea is valuable to understand visual arts and its ability to create discomfort.

The individual can analyze that discomfort to look beyond the literal. The tenets of the Surrealist movement are particularly interesting when viewed in light of what Anandavarshana and Abhinavgupta talked about in the *Dhvanyaloka* theory. The focus on reaction and the power of suggestion can be seen here. Abhinava Gupta developed the theory of Rasa in semantic ways, which is called Dhvani theory. Anandavardhana explored the Dhvani theory through structures, and is considered the main exponent of the theory. The poetics of rasa and dhvani can be applied to almost all kinds of fine arts including painting. There are nine rasas which are considered the chief components of any produced artwork. An accomplished artwork has such emotional relish or rasa which can move the mind of its spectators. All of these theorists focused on the mind of the person experiencing art. The artwork usually produces a desire or different moods in the mind of its onlookers (Sharma, 2021, p. 1612). The dhvani theory is based on the power of suggestion by the artist. Like surrealism, it focuses on what the unseen implications of the artwork are. This research views Bikash Bhattacharjee's Doll series from a Eurocentric (Foucauldian) and an Indocentric lens. It discusses the arbitrary nature of meaning. It focuses on Indian surrealism and Western poststructuralism and how they come together in the work of Bikash Bhattacharjee's Doll series (through their parallels and differences). The argument is how different views affect perceptions and realities. It dwells further into the historical landscape of the work and the series' revolutionary subtleties. These subtleties are viewed in relation to Anandavardhana's Dhvani theory as subtlety is procured as suggestive.

This paper discusses how meaning is generated in surrealist paintings. For that purpose, it employs Michel Foucault's *This is Not A Pipe*. This work is one of the first to highlight the value of paintings in representing ideas. The book builds up on the then ongoing discourse regarding the infinitude of interpretations and instability of language. *Foucault on Painting* by Catherine M. Soussloff plays an important role in explaining Foucault's understanding regarding paintings. This paper also focuses on Indian surrealism and how ideas regarding meaning-making are connected through space and time. The work of ancient linguists Bhatrihari and Anandavardhana has been cited to not only highlight the richness of ancient Indian texts and India's contribution in the field of linguistics, but to also signify the key difference between Indian and Western surrealism. The former is grounded in cultural history and spirituality. This utilizes "Dancing with Nine Colours: The Nine Emotional States of Indian Rasa Theory" by Dyutiman Mukhopadhyay, as well as "A Comparative Analysis of Rasa and Dhavani Theory in the Artworks of Male and Female Artists" by Mandakini Sharma and Richa Thapliyal to develop the understanding of concepts like dhvani and *sphota*. The aim of this research is to develop a theoretical and historical framework that could be utilised to further analyse Indian surrealism, an area in which little academic work has been conducted. Lastly, the paper discusses the Doll series by Bikash Bhattacharjee to highlight how such a theoretical framework can be utilized.

2. Surrealism and India

Indian history is enriched with its own kind of surrealism as artist Suraj Kumar Kashi said in an interview, “As Indians, we have grown with surrealism around us. We see the elephant-headed Lord Ganesha, Lord Hanuman in monkey form, gods and goddesses with multiple faces and arms. Surrealism also shines through in the stories we listen to, with animals that talk and humans who fly. It is everywhere—in our homes, folklore, and even in our dreams”. Several Indian artists have drawn inspiration from the surrealist movement, while having access to fascinating and often eccentric tales from scriptures and mythologies. It could be said that it was the natural progression for them due to the cultural and historical influence that surrounded them. Indian art tends to inhabit realms of the ‘unconscious’. Our rich mythical and spiritual heritage has left its mark on Indian literature and artistry. Prahlad Bubbar discusses a brush drawing of a composite elephant dating to around 1625 labelled “A Fantastical Elephant Driven by Demons Past a Waq-Waq Tree” from the 17th century. The painting has mythical and virtuous undertones as it displays a divine belief in the unity of all living beings. He commends the vibrant “A Composite Ram” from Kota, Rajasthan, (circa 1750), that highlights this tradition in a Hindu context. The painting “Lovers in Union”, a painting on cloth from 18th century Orissa displays a metaphorical coupling that invokes union with the divine (*Prahlad Bubbar — the Surreal in Indian Painting*, 2013). Another instance of surrealist tendencies can be seen through the rich history of the Tantric tradition in Indian scriptures and storytelling that finds a place in artworks through the centuries. ‘Tantras’ exhibit rituals and the importance of the teacher (guru) in the pursuit of spiritual gain. “The Chakras of the Subtle Body” is a manifestation of the seven ‘chakras’ (the internal centres of energy) within the ‘spiritual’ body. The painting is over three metres long and illustrates a Hindu text that outlines specific mantras. The impact of art is often measured by its ability to move and effect viewers, a principle that aligns with the Indian aesthetic concept of *kavyadosa*, or “fault,” as described by Bhamaha in his *Kavyalankara*. These faults—such as contradictory meanings, redundancy, doubt, lack of coherent sequence, and counter-factual elements—are considered deviations in art’s aesthetic quality. Surrealist art frequently embodies these faults, challenging conventional expectations of coherence and realism (Kapoor, 1998, p.93). Bhattacharjee’s work represents real people whose significance lies in their simplicity. The photo-realist style combined with the farce and the sub-human elements challenge perceptions. His work is not merely a defiance in the technical artistic sense but also in its invitation to interrogation. Bhattacharjee shows boldness by representing people or things that are neither famous nor actively suffering[1].

[1] Bhattacharjee makes many references to historical figures, characters from Bengali literature, and has made portraits of Rabindranath Tagore, M.F. Husain, Shambhu Mitra and Indira Gandhi. Yet, he stayed loyal to representing the inner lives of the people from Kolkata.

A lack of spectacle is the fantasy. The fantasy becomes deeper through the 'surrealist twists' as Bhattacharjee played with anatomy, gender, age and other visual categories which culturally become concretised subjectivities. Nevertheless, Surrealism shares a parallel with the Indian view of *kavya* (literary composition), which values not just the form or content but the manner of expression itself. *Kavya* is revered almost as the fifth Veda in the *Natyasastra*, providing moral and philosophical guidance akin to the role of art in life. Similarly, Surrealism, born out of the aftermath of World War I and advances in science and technology, seeks to reveal deeper truths through the symbolic language of dreams. Surrealist cinema, much like dreams, interweaves contradictory aspects of reality, allowing for a unified tension between opposites without the constraints of logic. This pursuit can also lead to the experience of *santa* (tranquility), a *rasa* achieved through cognitive and emotional processes, which Surrealism can effectively evoke (Kapoor, 1998, p. 84).

Anandavardhana's *dhvani* theory in the *Dhvanyaloka* explores verbal symbolism and the layered meanings that extend beyond the literal. According to this theory, three levels of meaning exist: *abidha* (literal), *laksana* (socio-cultural), and *vyanjana* (suggestive, shaped by context and form). This approach underscores how literary works can surpass rational discourse by offering deeper layers of meaning. Surrealism similarly rejects conventional logic and employs complex symbolism, aligning with the idea of *dhvani* in its ability to provide profound insights and knowledge through its intricate and evocative forms.

3. Theoretical Context For Surrealism

Foucault is widely recognised for *What is the Author?* (1969) in which he discusses the role of the author. It is important to understand that interpretations comes from the reader^[2] even if they are inspired or influenced by what the author may have intended. Thus, Foucault coined the term 'author-function'. The author-function replaces the author as an entity and refers to the discourse that surrounds the author and the body of the work. This idea of interpretation is called anti-intentionalism as it goes beyond the intentions of the author. In *The Personal Heresy* (1939) C.S. Lewis condemns the growing notion that poetry is an expression of personality. Lewis writes how this tendency can even be found in reputable criticism (Lewis, 1939, p. 2). He states how 'personality' exists within poetry but by annihilating the poet's subjectivity and drawing from common people (pp. 3-4). If analyzed broadly, certain parallels can be found between the previously these ideas and ancient Indian poetics. These ideas focus on how meaning is generated and the role of the unconscious mind in this creation. According to Bhartihari, language by itself does not have a sequence even though it is expressed in a sequentially graded body.

[2] When we talk about works of art, a reader can be understood as any one with the ability to establish a coherent interpretation of any artwork.

The relation between the uttered word and meaning or sphota is like the relation between an object and its reflection in flowing water; like the uttered word reflects the meaning alongside the essence of the giver of that meaning (Chandran). Meaning is not a fixed entity, but is entirely contextual. As we have seen with Derrida's concept of language, this frees the translator from the concern of attaining the meaning of the original. Similarly, Anandavardhana highlighted the levels of meaning through Dhvani. Dhvani is a function of language and highlights the conditions, and the context in which a word or sentence may give rise to a specific meaning. This interrelatedness forms the ideal backdrop for the Indian artist Bikash Bhattacharjee to be inspired by, one of the co-founders of the Surrealist movement, Spanish artist Salvador Dali. Around the same time as Bhattacharjee was creating his famous Doll series and Durga series, the core content of the poststructuralist theories were being presented to the world. In 1968, Foucault published his book *This is Not A Pipe*, which was written after Foucault exchanged a few letters with the famous surrealist painter Rene Magritte. The playful tone of the book sways away from his other famous works. The book is a contemplation of Magritte's painting "The Treachery of Images" which shows the drawing of a simple pipe with the, as Foucault flippantly calls "a childish scrawl", 'This is Not A Pipe' (Foucault, 1973, p.16). Magritte provides a visual critique of language by bluntly writing this sentence below a conventional drawing of a pipe. Foucault highlights:

Yet perhaps the sentence refers precisely to the disproportionate, floating, ideal pipe-simple notion or fantasy of a pipe. Then we should have to read, "Do not look overhead for a true pipe. That is a pipe dream. It is the drawing within the painting, firmly and rigorously outlined, that must be accepted as a manifest truth " (Foucault, 1973, pp.16-17).[3]

The painting through its simplicity led to a spiritual questioning about the structures we surround ourselves with. This painting did so by making the viewer question the structures found within language, while other surrealist painters attempted to break down social conditioning through similar artistic metaphors. The contrast between visual rhetoric and the sentence (understood through established linguistic convention) is what leads to the enquiry. An important feature of surrealist paintings is to present everyday objects in locations that they would conventionally not be found in. Our established contexts associate certain ideas with others and this break in patterns leads to deeper inquiries. Such examinations are often socio-political in nature as was the case with the Doll series by Bikash Bhattacharjee. The Doll series can be analyzed through the lens of contemporary theoretical work from the Western literary tradition as well as ancient Indian poetics. Additionally, several parallels can be highlighted between the different analyses to signify the universality of linguistic mechanics.

[3] Foucault points out that the label 'pipe' (as a word) is not directly connected to the physical object but rather is a symbol. His reflection shows that this disconnect between the image, the word and the object itself reveals the complexity of how humans perceive and categorise the world around us. Language is man-made and unstable, yet it endlessly shapes perceptions and comprehensions of realities.

4. The Surreal and the Social

In a world where globalisation had grasped cultural conversations and political chaos had become normal, Bhattacharjee saw something human in a toy. The inspiration comes from a personal experience and his life plays a crucial role in providing depth to the paintings. The era of post structuralism brought the role of the artist into question, and Foucault, to an extent, 'solved' the intellectual and ethical misgivings of rejecting the role of the author by establishing 'author-function'. However, with growing output of literary ideas it is important to explore more cross sections in art and literature. Bhattacharjee's Indian content did not lack Western inspiration but remains Indian art at its core. Art belongs to the artist while becoming part of the community's history and culture. The nuances surrounding the belongingness of art are never ending. The discussion around the justification of certain interpretations are important and the value of such an interpretation lies in the discussion itself. Foucault highlighted the importance of questioning reality and Dhvani showcased the essence which is found beyond the literal. The emphasis is on intangibility, however, this often leads to a misguided neglect of the literal.

An aversion to theories of interpretation that rely on entities made poststructuralism far too ambitious for interpreters. The entity is tangible and accessible, and while post structuralism emphasizes contextualism, the author-function is intangible. Perhaps one can "easily imagine a culture where discourse would circulate without any need for an author" but this hypothesis is idealistic and convolutes how entity-based (communal) interpretation provides knowledge to subjective cognitions (Foucault, 1969, p. 314). This is evident in Noël Carroll's 2016 survey article on interpretation in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Literature* as actual intentionalism remains the most popular position among all. It has achieved the status as the philosophy of interpretation has evolved within the dichotomy of intentionalism and anti-intentionalism, and therefore within their respective constraints.

The process of removing constraints in interpretation as endorsed by poststructuralism is hindered by its association with anti-intentionalism, which is also known as conventionalism. Moreover, within any capitalist economy that reduces art to commodity and ownership, further entrapped under the rules of copyright and legal issues associated with artworks, the author or the artist as an entity has naturally gained unmet prominence within any discourse regarding their own work (Walker). The statement is not being presented to question the moral nature (or even the pros or cons) of this reality but rather to highlight how ubiquitous structuralities, when go unacknowledged, skew the anti-structuralist processes of interpretation. Subjectivity finds itself regulated by certain structured practices due to their ubiquity. Interpretation can gain larger focus in the meaning-making process and should subsume authorial intent. Robert Young points out –'post-structuralism' suggests that

structuralism itself can only exist as always already inhabited by post-structuralism, which comes both behind and after. . . post-structuralism becomes structuralism's primal scene. . . we haven't gone beyond structuralism. We're still within it insofar as structuralism and post-structuralism inhabit each other. The reason is that if we want to go beyond structuralism because of its metaphysical assumptions, we find that it is precisely metaphysics beyond which we cannot go (Young, 1982, pp. 4-5).

Post-structuralism's "chaos concepts", as Lene Hansen claims, "do very little to offer solutions", and focus on unearthing 'truths' (p. 1056). Interpretation, when understood broadly as knowledge, is found within an amalgamation; this amalgamation, that is to be seen as acknowledged chaos, is to be the basis of this conception towards interpretation (van Woudenberg ch. 8 183-207). The importance of novelty in this 'chaos' is remarkably undeniable.

Bikash Bhattacharjee was known for social realism in his art, however the label 'social surrealist' would be more ideal for him. Social Surrealists felt that change was required in their artwork that would reflect the political turmoil they witnessed. They were inspired by surrealist techniques that condensed time and space, and juxtaposing objects in an illogical manner. For Bikash Bhattacharjee's artwork to be seen through this lens, and for interpretation to expand, learning about the author's context is inevitable. Poststructuralism is "not an epistemological theory; it is a political stance. It does not offer a "god's eye" or a "we know better" (Stengers, 2008) view. It commits to change, while vigorously redefining what 'change' entails in every discussion. Bhattacharjee's doll was an emotionally charged political statement and a sombre personal reflection. The surreal contrast in the painting is real, the significations of the doll to the political turmoil are abstract, and lastly the experiences and the context that inspire the painting were personal, interpersonal and concrete. The doll series is somewhat unique as it is able to represent these levels of understanding as separately as possible. A 'doll', as a symbol, lacks obvious comparisons. Compare the 'doll' to the Durga series by Bhattacharjee, which depicted the Hindu Goddess Durga as an ordinary, struggling Bengali woman, and we may realise that the name of the latter series conveys something direct. The name and the word 'Durga' has deep religious and cultural ties that evoke strong emotions, while 'doll' leaves an empty ominous space. This space craves context that leads to the 'birth of the painter' for someone simply viewing the artworks.

5. Naxal Movement and Bhattacharjee's Doll

Bikash Bhattacharjee believed in individualism unlike several political ideologies and messaging present in West Bengal of the 1960s and 1970s. His movement towards abstraction in his painting was in part a technique to give each individual dignity by highlighting every person's pain and suffering. Bhattacharjee (born in 1940 in Kolkata) led an incredibly challenging life after losing his father at a very young age. His experiences left him with a deep sense of empathy for the underprivileged. The Doll series was conceived in 1970 and reflected Bhattacharjee's emotional response to the violence that erupted across Kolkata as a result of the Naxal movement. As per an article written by Biplab Dasgupta in 1973 –

The fifth period began in July/August 1971, a few months after the 1971 election in West Bengal, when the government decided to destroy the Naxalite movement. Their task was made easier by the fact that by then the ruffians and teenage dropouts had replaced the college students as the main activist elements inside the movement, and through them the police and the informers had penetrated the organisation. The decentralised and loose nature of the organisation also worked against the Naxalites. In a matter of two or three weeks, through a series of swift armed operations, the serious elements in the movement were either killed or imprisoned, while the anti-social elements defected to the youth organisation of the Congress party. Overnight the "liberated areas" of the Naxalites became Congress strongholds. (Dasgupta, 1973, p. 173).

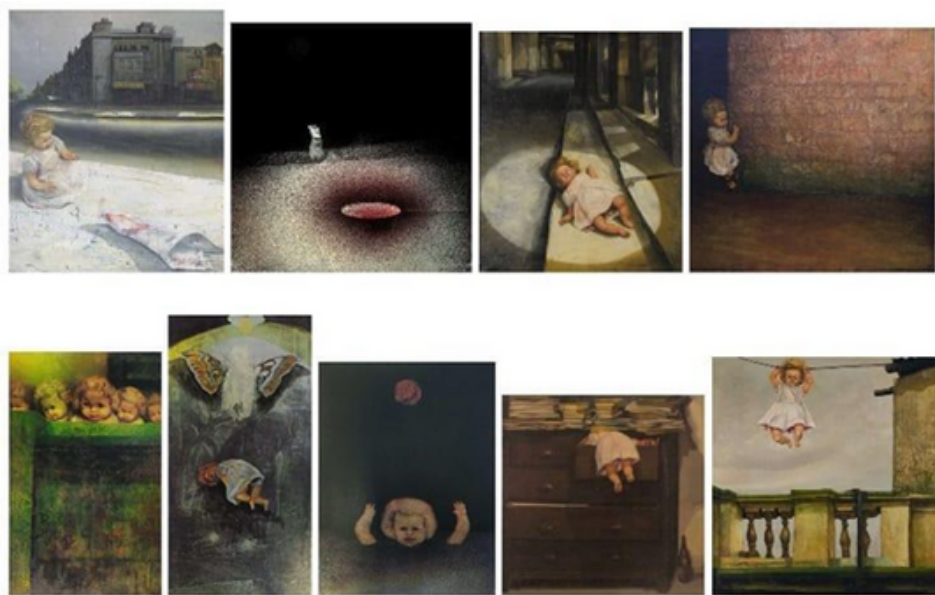
This was the state of Bengal whose people served as an inspiration for Bhattacharjee. The flaws recognised in some Naxalites' practices were their tactic of annihilation of individualism and their fervent faith in politically motivated violence. It is interesting to note that Bhattacharjee's work represented the individual foremost, and the 'individual' symbolised the struggling, middle-class Bengali people. Bikash Bhattacharjee's artistic journey is deeply rooted in his experiences in Kolkata, a city that can be called his muse. Kolkata underwent dramatic changes before and after India's independence. Kolkata was a hub of affluence and colonial grandeur, however, after independence, Bhattacharjee observed the contrast as the city struggled with poverty, industrialization and the loss of its colonial sheen. Something similar happens to Bhattacharjee's paintings as his palette in his later work have a lot more muted hues. The loss of a colourful 'sheen' evolved into the representation of colloquial Kolkata. The doll, in its inanimate, helpless state, heightened the atmosphere of his work. Kolkata was experiencing a 'renaissance', and with that came an eerie innocence. The lifeless figure of the doll, in Bhattacharjee's hands, represented the innocence of a socio-economic rebirth while remaining haunted by the death which any rebirth requires. Bhattacharjee was six when he lost his father. He ended up at his maternal uncle's home, and witnessed his mother struggle to raise two children. His experiences left him with a deep

sense of empathy for the underprivileged, especially women. He spent his childhood and teenage years roaming every corner of the city, every place he could access, and the images of individuals were etched into his creative spirit. The doll, often portrayed as abandoned and helpless, symbolises a childhood filled with loss and turmoil. It is a vulnerable and empty figure. It is meant to be controlled and remain a play-thing, like an inner child which is unable to heal. The doll is a figure caught between life and death, showing the aberrations of mortality. In this sense, the Doll series became a means of searching for connection and understanding in a world that seemed increasingly alien and fractured.

The surreal dolls seemed to be misplaced and lost, and had their eyes erased. Through this Bhattacharjee mourned the erasure of individuality in the charged political climate of his time. His work led to the resurgence of realism in Indian paintings as is visible in the photo-realistic images of the dolls; however the surrealist tendencies are apparent through the power of Dhvani (suggestion). Bikash cooked up the idea of this series as a small girl wanted him to repair a discoloured baby doll. It was a time when Kolkata was going through immense political violence (due to the Naxal movement). Bikash witnessed some of the most gruesome killings in the police brutality and the clashes during protests. One night Bhattacharjee had an epiphany as he was walking the empty streets to his North Kolkata home with a doll. Thus, the idea for the Doll series was conceived.

Figure 1

The following figure shows most of the artwork from the Doll series.



Note. By Bikash Bhattacharjee, 1970-1974,

6. This is Not A Doll

In *This is Not a Pipe*, Foucault talks about the implications of photorealistic images with a simple message associated with it. Though not exactly the same as Magritte's pipe, Doll series is known for its simplicity. Most of them have straightforward titles while many are just called 'Doll'. As Foucault mentions for Magritte's painting, the dolls too tend to be "a figure and the text that names it" (Foucault, 1973, p. 28). Foucault highlights the convention of language, and the societal need to ask and define things. Just like Magritte's pipe is not literally a pipe, Bhattacharjee's doll is not a literal doll. The difference in the paintings lies in the idea of contradiction. Magritte's painting is effective as it creates a conundrum of contradiction. The image and the text present contradictory ideas based on general context, then refuse to be contradictory as text and illustration belong to different realms, and lastly the statement rings true, as a material pipe, in fact, is not the same as a drawing of a pipe. This idea when applied to Bhattacharjee's dolls leads to a complex weaving of interpretations which are relevant to both the history and the present. The doll was just a doll, a toy or a puppet, for an artist to represent. However, it is also not a doll, it is a false representation. The paintings resemble a doll but are not just dolls, they are symbols. They unsettle by design, through the deliberate effort of the artist. The word 'doll' is the introduction to many of the paintings in the series, and this title misleads by being truthful. The 'doll' is the state of the people of Kolkata. The title is true, the language is true (or the closest thing to the truth) but the visuals remind the viewer that the word is not completely true, as the visuals present something not seen in real life. Thus, they mislead into the path of recognition, into the direction of symbolism. This symbolism is uncomfortable and leads the ignorant (someone unfamiliar with the history of Kolkata) towards knowledge.

Figure 2

The Treachery of Images



Note. Rene Magritte, 1929.

Thus, the mere physical existence of the art keeps not only the memory alive but finds relevance, in any era, through its powerful resonance.

In the doll paintings, the contradiction lies between the details and the object in focus. The aim of the series is social realism. The object (the doll) elicits recognition and then the state it is present in disconcerts the viewer. The surrealist interpretation comes from this uncanny identification. The doll is an effective allegory that symbolises the lost innocence of young men and women. It depicts a meta understanding of its viewer, as the people of Kolkata at the time would not find it jarring to see the image of a human in a dark, ominous state. It was the reality that they lived in. Most people, including children, were used to violent and grim situations. Thus, it was important to use a feminine, toy figure that revealed a sense of innocence and individuality.

Foucault rejected the hierarchy in art that placed words over paintings. In his work, he emphasised the potential of paintings to reveal and exhibit. In Bhattacharjee's work, we see this hierarchy flip. The word 'doll' in itself reveals very little to the reader, but the image of this doll carries years of political and social turmoil from pre-independent times to the violent protests in the 1970s. Foucault toyed with the concept of representations in images and paintings and what they invoke (together and separately). In Foucault on Painting Catherine M. Soussloff contends—

According to Foucault in The Archaeology of Knowledge, the archaeology of painting would not be centered on the artist and the 'murmur of his intentions ... transcribed ...into lines, surfaces, and colors'. Thus, the archaeology of painting rejects the long-standing centrality in the history of art of the artist's personality and style, as a primary means of understanding the significance of painting. To reject the artist's personality and style, however, does not mean that Foucault negated the importance of what any individual artist had contributed to the understanding of painting through his or her paintings (Soussloff, 2011, pp. 114-115).

She highlighted that Foucault understood paintings not through the painter but with the painter. Bhattacharjee's doll series can definitely be looked at as ominous paintings of humanoid dolls, as Foucault highlights "resemblance and affirmation cannot be dissociated" (p.34). Even without context, the painting can be and should be analyzed in various ways as its power lies in how 'little' it contains and how empty the canvas can feel. Yet, understanding the painter's life and intention enriches interpretation in general. Through gestures, the painting invokes discomfort and begs to be fully understood.

7. Dhvani and the Doll

'Natyasastra' mentions 'sentiments' or 'Rasas' which are produced when certain 'dominant states' (sthayi Bhava), 'transitory states' (vyabhicari Bhava) and 'temperamental states' (sattvika Bhava) of emotions come together (Mukhopadhyay, 2022, p. 2). When Bhattacharjee thought of placing a baby doll as the central motif of the desolate city, brimming with the terror of political violence, he deliberately located the toy in a setting where it would look abnormal and invoke sentiments. He accompanied the doll with vivid or implicit gestures that invoked an uncanny response from the viewer. When we analyze the painting through the Rasa theory, both the Karuna (pathetic) and Bhayanaka (terrible) rasas are evoked. In the Foucauldian reading, though far differently, we saw how these sentiments were generated. It is important to note that both the rasas are gestured through the visuals, without a historical background the Bhayanaka rasa becomes central. The paintings are meant to represent a combination of innocence and menace. The doll comes to life during the night and is seen rummaging through chests of drawers. A little red book[4] is placed in the frame that reflects the situation in a lot of Bengali households during that time. The lifeless object is on the quiet streets of Bengal, menacingly peering through street corners, hanging on clothing lines, or even in a pile of other dolls. The paintings invoke disquieting horror and a sense of unease through dreary and murky backgrounds. The concept of Karuna (the highest form of compassion) comes from the generic associations of a doll. Doll represents innocence, fragility, femininity, etc. The compassion formed from these associations are meant to extend to the people of Bengal that the doll in focus is meant to represent. Bhattacharjee had a deep sense of reverence for women and female figures tended to be his subjects in his paintings. His pity and compassion for all women, from everyday women and young girls to the impoverished prostitutes can be seen in his work, where the central motif in eighty percent of the paintings were women. Some women belonged to the red light districts[5], and some were fighting for their liberation, and many even accepted their fates. Regardless, Bhattacharjee's insightful and empathetic probe into women's oppression extended to everyone in the doll series through an allegorical vision of the subverted feminine. Anandvardhan attained fame in the 9th century A.D. The Dhvani Theory obtained expression in Anandvardhan's 'Dhvanyaloka'. The Dhvani theory allows the sensible categorisation of a painting's analysis, particularly for a surrealist painting. Anandavardhana's theory recognises suggestive poetry as the highest form of poetry. This idea can also be applied to suggestive paintings. Dhvani is highlighted through three major aspects. First, *abhidha* or denotation (the literal meaning of the expression).

[4] Referring to Mao's red book whose quotes were treated like gospel. Every comrade was expected to carry this book at all times. The book declined in popularity after the death of Charu Majumdar and the end of the first phase of the Naxalite movement in 1972.

[5] A red-light district refers to an area in a city in which many brothels and commercial sex-based activities are located.

Figure 3
Doll



Note. Bikash Bhattacharjee, 1972

In the doll series, the word doll and the object illustrated are meant to represent the literal doll a viewer can easily understand. As mentioned in the Foucauldian analysis, the literal meaning i.e., the abhidha is important to establish the impactful contradiction. The second aspect, *laksana* or indication, refers to the external quality of the expression. This aspect can be seen in the paintings through the artistic features and the style of the painting. The grim and haunting background, the scratched eyes, the contrast between the lightly coloured doll with the darkly painted backgrounds, the erased empty eyes, the artistic quality, photo-realism, etc. are features that express something separately and together. These external qualities are techniques used by artists to indicate separate or similar concepts in different works of art. In each artwork they come together to reflect specific ideas or the third aspect of dhvani, *vyanjana* or the suggested sense. Vyanjana refers to the expression that suggests something beyond itself. The power of suggestion is immense. As discussed, the author suggests a lot more than what is literally present in the painting. The series suggests the suffering of the individual and the loss of innocence. Within a single glance, they carry centuries of theoretical, historical and artistic precedent.

In the grand frame of history, Bhattacharjee's artwork can be said to be more textually connected to the Eurocentric view than the Indocentric view (in relation to this discussion). After all, Bhattacharjee found artistic inspiration from the West and trained in a post-Independence academic arena deeply influenced by Europe. This Eurocentrism is a result of Western hegemony particularly since the beginnings of globalisation. A Foucauldian view is also assisted by Foucault's close association with surrealism, the art style in which Bhattacharjee founded his innovation. However, the Indocentric view serves a dual purpose here. Firstly, it hinges the discussion on aesthetic connectedness. It is a deliberate analytic technique that acknowledges the influence of Indian poetics and prevents the discussion from being an unbroken chain of Foucauldian musings. Secondly, it serves an intrinsic purpose linked with the central theoretical essence of this discussion. Bhattacharjee's work uses aesthetic aberration for invocation. Simultaneously, the aesthetics bleed culture and stories through its social realism. There are many elements to interpret and as many reasons to question interpretation itself. The paintings' visual instability serve as poetry. When looked at as language and as defiance against established power dynamics, the Foucauldian lens provides great insight. The oppression that the middle-class Bengali people dealt with has been aesthetically represented. The power dynamics have been challenged in his work. However, this insight is limited by socio-political and academic boundaries. Unlike several Western surrealist works, Bhattacharjee's work went beyond 'commentary on language'. The elements are a lot more haunting and fantastical. When we view the poetry in these paintings, the surreal mythologies in its representations, the ability to invoke *bhavas* and when we recognise the context of the creator, the Indocentric lens allows us to glimpse at the paintings as something to be experienced, as someone's legacy and not just as something to be analysed as 'text'.

Both the lenses are connected by their inability to truly define. They engage with the elements and interpret in their own ways. They even fixate on the instability of meaning in different ways. Thus, it feels imperative to weave the Indocentric view with the Eurocentric view to ironically emphasise that no such dichotomy (trichotomy or multi-chotomy) can exist when mapping the potentiality of meaning.

8. Conclusion

Studying something as seemingly 'simple' as Bhattacharjee's Doll series requires extensive care. Several nuances and contexts can co-exist to produce a medley of interpretations, while recognising that these discussions are endless. Though paintings are a visual medium, the process of interpretation is rather textual. The relationship between words, and visuals should be scrutinised as it reveals a closer look at the threads in the fabric of reality. Very few scholarly articles exist that discuss Indian surrealism or the movement's place in the Indian context. It is important to understand and contextualise Indian poetics that Indian artists grow up learning, alongside the international art they get inspired by. Bikash Bhattacharjee's Doll series has this fascinating quality of being Indian and surreal in a post-structuralist world. When we look at the ideas of free play, author-function, reader-response, we can find similar concepts being discussed in ancient Indian poetics in theories of Sphota, Rasa and Dhvani and several others. The ideas feel universal as they empower individuality, sentiments, imagination and consciousness. Though similar in many ways, Indian poetics has a spiritual approach to art and language while contemporary criticism attempts to create a scientific understanding. Western Surrealism departed from these scientific tendencies by highlighting dreams, magic and the potential of the unconscious. It is believed that a spiritual commune to India is the only way to truly understand the soul of surrealism as the key to unlocking the unconscious mind is spirituality (Torsch). Surrealist tendencies and inspirations from the West blended in easily with the rich cultural precedent already found in the zeitgeist of Bhattacharjee's India. Thus, the movement and the surrealist style has found a place amongst Indian artists.

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