Parody as positive dissent in Hindi theatre

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Abstract
Parody (etymologically a voice alongside another voice) involves imitation, but what is crucial is the co-presence of these two voices, the parodying and the parodied. It is the dialogue between two enunciative spheres, two utterances, hence its preeminent position in the Bakhtinian concept of dialogism. The two points of view, set against each other dialogically, represent two utterances, speakers, styles, languages, and axiological systems, even if they issue from a single speaker. As a reflexive device and critical manipulation of canonized forms, parody has often been considered as the epitome of postmodernism in European and North American literature and artistic expression. The paper aims to show that, in Hindi theatre, parody is politically significant. The article focuses on Bhartendu Hariścandra (1850—1885) and Habīb Tanvīr (1923—2009). It argues that the use of the quotes of Nazīr Akbarābādī in Tanvīr’s most famous play Agrā Bazār, a poet who himself parodies the traditional poetical canons, enhances a literary reflexivity that is one of the deepest creative devices of Indian culture.

Keywords: Habib Tanvir, Bhartendu, postmodernity, reflexivity, parody, canonized form, popular culture, marketplace culture

There is a famous aphorism by Nietzsche in Daybreak (Morgenröte) which has often been quoted to emphasize that parody cannot be dissociated from modern culture as characterized by (auto) reflexivity. It also suggests that parody rules out any dream or phantasm relating man to a divine origin, and generally to any phantasm of origin. Here is the piece:

“One sought to awake the feeling of man’s sovereignty by showing his divine birth: it is now a forbidden path; for, at the door, there is the monkey”

Looking for his origin, man finds the monkey, his ancestor, who is at the same time his imitator: this makes man’s origin inextricably linked to imitation, and imitation an alternative for the divine, in terms of origin.

Parody does indeed involve imitation, even if etymologically it simply means “a song/discourse (odos) alongside (para) another one” – the word itself parodia is attested since ancient Greek with the meaning “counter-song”. This voice alongside another voice is rarely a bare imitation (the latter usually considered “pastiche”) and is more often a counter voice. This view of parody as a powerful device for criticizing highly repressive “theological” societies was indeed the first strong theory of parody with Bakhtin’s analysis of what he calls “carnival” in medieval societies, particularly French, with his pioneering study of Rabelais and

1 Aphorism 49. A formulation used as a subtitle in the collective work Pour une théorie de la Parodie: Le singe à la porte (For a Theory of Parody: the Monkey at the Door) (Groupar ed.), Peter Lang, 1984.
folk culture, but also in all kinds of Western cultures at various points in their history. At the same time, Bakhtin himself insists on the ambivalence of parody and carnival: although highly subversive, carnival is consecrated by the tradition – both social and ecclesiastic (1968: 5) for a prescribed duration of time. These popular festivals, authorized by church authorities, while consistently opposing the “serious” official and normative culture and transgressing the accepted values, often including violent parody of the official norms, also posit these very norms that they contest. As pointed out by Linda Hutcheon (1984: 15), in an essay interestingly titled “Authorized Transgression”, “parody posits, as a pre-requisite to its very existence, a certain aesthetic institutionalization which entails the acknowledgement of recognizable, stable forms and conventions”. Its ambivalence consists in the fact that it posits and at the same time de-posit: it subverts by recognizing the forms of legitimacy in order to de-legitimize them. This is in conformity with the formal features of the parodic discourse: what is crucial is the co-presence of two voices, the parodying and the parodied, two enunciative spheres, two utterances, hence its eminent position in the Bakhtinian concept of dialogism. “The two points of view are not mixed but set against each other dialogically” (Bakhtin 1981: 360), they represent “two utterances, two speakers, two styles, two ‘languages, two semantic and axiological systems” (304), even if the parodied “belongs, by its grammatical and compositional markers, to a single speaker”. An exact quotation can be a parody in certain contexts, but usually the parodying involves some modification of the parodied, which can be a text, a genre, a theme, a discursive style. As a reflexive device and critical manipulation of canonized forms, parody has often been considered the epitome of postmodernism (Hutcheon 2002) in European and North American literature and artistic expression.

In Indian literature, particularly Hindi literature, parody does not enjoy the same popularity as it does in Europe, nor has literary criticism been much interested in it – pastiche is a something else if we think of the much talked about but isolated book by Jaydev, The Culture of Pastiche.

However, there are quite a few examples, particularly in the theatrical genres. Apart from the unique case of K.B. Vaid, whose theatre makes a highly original use of parody and auto-parody, street theatre for instance (nukkar nāṭak), a radical theatre of protest, makes generous use of parody, particularly of styles and types of discourse (parody of religious discourse and preaching, of political discourse, of

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2 It is also ambivalent in another sense, which Bakhtin also recognizes, for it may be essentially destructive/reductive and merely polemical, aiming exclusively at debasing the parodied object (negative parody), or it may propose new forms of regeneration out of the old models, aiming at a dialectical restructuration (positive parody).
3 For parody of a genre or theme, see M. Riffaterre 1984.
4 Although the first and widely commented example of parody in modern European literature, Cervantes’s Don Quijote, has often been deemed to signify the birth of modernity.
5 The notion of “pastiche” is rightly emphasized by the title, since the writers he stigmatizes for embodying a “culture of pastiche” are, according to him, sterile imitators of the Western culture, totally disconnected from the indigenous culture (a stigmatization, by the way, that is most questionable with most of his examples).
6 His play Parivār akhāṛā (“Family as fighting arena”) is analyzed in Montaut 2012.
vain intellectual quests in the parody of absurd theatre, etc.\(^7\)), mostly used as a critical device explicitly aimed at subverting or destroying the dominant structures and norms voiced by the parodied.

One of the most ancient and famous uses of parody, elaborated on the basis of the farcical techniques of the Parsi theatre in the mid 19\(^{th}\) century theatre is to be found in Bhartendu’s major farce (prahasana), Andher Nagrī (1881), “The City of Darkness”. The play opens with a low-keyed parody of the sadhus’ hierarchy and language. One of the disciples, sent by their Mahant to nearby towns to beg, arrives at the bazaar of Andher Nagri — whose king is insane (caupaṭ rājā) — and he discovers to his utmost surprise that every vegetable, fruit, sweetmeat is sold for the same price, “one penny a pound”, ek ṭakkā ser. He listens to the sellers who glorify their goods in a very funny way, some of them simply a realistic imitation of the popular culture prevailing in any bazaar of that time, since amplification, a well-known device of parody, is also a common feature of popular culture and particularly of the shouting to advertise one’s goods in the bazaar. But some of them insidiously start subverting the genre of the street sellers’ shouting, for instance the pacakvālā, seller of digestive powder, who mentions as his regular customers the whole city of Benares, from prostitutes of all ranks to the highest nobility, doctors, landlords, soldiers, and sahibs, before adding to the list the police superintendent who finds great help in the powder for easy digestion of the bribes he has to swallow; and then the British, who can digest the whole of Hindustan with the help of the magic powder. And as an extra piece of attractive information, the pacakvālā adds that his cūran (digestive powder) may have a Hindustani name (uskā nām hindustānī) but works as a foreign thing (uskā kāṃ vilāyiṭ). After a whole array of more or less parodized sellers, the jātvālā arrives as a final experience for the disciple: he sells castes, and can, according to the wish of the customer, have a Dhobi made into a Brahman, a Christian into a Muslim, and a Brahman into a Christian, lie into truth, evil into virtue, highest into lowest, lowest into highest; he can sell the four Vedas, all that “for a penny” (ṭakke ke āste).

This is funny, but fun is also meaningful: parody stigmatizes the norm of this very particular bazaar and generally of the whole system underlying city life. Where there is no real price, where everything, rare or common, sacred or trivial, is sold for the same price, then all amounts to sheer arbitrariness and a distortion of the very principle of economic value and market, a meaning made obvious in the following act, a parody of arbitrary justice in the Nawab’s court. Within ten minutes a dozen guilty persons, in an affair of a goat crushed by a tumbling wall, appear before the court and disappear after they have quickly shifted the blame onto the next fellow, in identical terms,\(^8\) each on to the next, until the last one, the poor disciple. Why? Because of the cheap sweets, the poor chap has become fat, so he is the only fat resi-

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\(^7\) Good examples of the first: Bakrī by Sarveshdoyal Saxena, staged by the Janam Theatre of Safdar Hashmi in 1974, of the combination of all: Nāṭak nahīṁ, or Pirangī lauf āe by Azgar Vazāḥat, etc. A novel like Rāg dārbāṛī by Shri Lal Shukla also combines features of parody, irony, and satire more creatively than in the classical instances (Harishankar Parsai) of what is presented as the tradition of satire in Hindi literature.

\(^8\) Merā koī kasūr nahīṁ / merā koī doṣ nahīṁ.
dent of this city of meagre people all ravaged by fear, the only one with a thick enough neck to be hanged in the place of the one finally sentenced, unlike the skinny kotwāl, too thin to be hanged. In the court episode, there is a clear denunciation of the rotten kingdom ruled by absolute and crazy authority. The nawab is the main parodic character, Mughal justice (and covertly despotic rule in general, including British rule), the parodized system, but also parodied are the plaintiffs and the accused, whose single reaction is to dismiss any responsibility in a mechanical chain of “it’s not me it’s he”.

The nawab, and through him, despotic rule, is stigmatized, which is not the case with the street sellers of the market place. The advertising shouts in the market, a multilayered parody, do not so clearly denounce anarchy and insanity. First, apart from the immediate purpose which, like the court sequence, is to make people laugh, there is the spontaneous parody which draws on the “natural” exaggeration and overstatement of the seller, frequently hinting at trivial interpretations of folk culture and obscene understatements (fish and orange-selling women). Then there is the theatrical treatment, which amplifies (stylization, repetition) the “normal” exaggeration while also making it into a covert political criticism and thereby transgressing the limits of acceptability in a “normal” marketplace (seller of castes, of digestive powder). Then there is the dramatic setting itself, that is, the author’s voice and “belief” which is indirectly suggested in the comic leitmotiv Caupaṭ Rājā, the anonymous King of Mess. Far from being a degrading parody of popular culture, the parodying text in the scene at the bazaar expands the potential of the parodied market advertising style to the point of absurdity in order to make it obvious that something is rotten in the kingdom. The scene in the darbar, a simpler parody with a clear target – to debase the drunken nawab whose tongue always twists – is aimed at ridiculing the court idiom and system, which helps in our reading of the more complex sequence in the bazaar.

The “serious” version of Bhartendu’s “belief” is well known, for instance through his famous discourse in Balia, which expressed ambivalence regarding the British rule and ideology (Dalmia 1997, 2006), but here, the stigmatization of the nawab culture of leisure that eschews real work, of superstition and laziness, is both stronger and bolder.

Another play from the 20th century contains a similar bazaar sequence also introduced by singing sadhus. Āgrā Bāzār by Habib Tanvir (1954) is indeed entirely set in the bazaar and consists exclusively of verbal exchanges in the public place, the locus of folk culture. First staged in Jamia Milia with students, university staff, villagers from Okhla – a not yet urban village at the time – a real pānvālā and a real

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9 Mechanicity works here both as a trigger of laughter (a classic analysis since Bergson, well implemented in Chaplin’s famous film *The Great Dictator*), and as a mimetic representation of the legal procedure depicted as a purely formal machine.

10 British censorship was becoming strict with a law recently having been passed for checking theatrical presentations.

11 Bakṛī comes out as lakṛī, larkī, barkī, an indication of his drunkenness, like his inability to correctly understand what is said (in pān khāie he hears the terrible name of Surpankḥā the rāḵṣāsī), and triggers laughter as in any farce, but also suggests a deeper inability to speak to the point and understand the basic complaints of the people.
barfvālā (sellers of betel and ice cream), an Okhla donkey, and workers from Tughlakabad, the play was subsequently taken to Delhi. In his various interviews and introductions to the play, Habib Tanvir does not mention Bhartendu, but comments at length on his debt to Nazir. Nazir Akbarabadi, an Urdu poet from the 19th century (supposed to have lived more than hundred years, dying in 1835), is practically never cited as a great poet or studied in the so-called wilderness between Mir and Ghalib. He wrote in all the genres codified in Urdu poetry, including the most celebrated ghazal, qasīdā, marsīyā, and masnavī. But what fascinates Habib Tanvir is Nazir’s nazmeṃ, pieces of variable length in a poetic genre more fluid than the ghazal, with rhymed metrical verses, which maintain the same theme, unlike the ghazal in which each verse is autonomous. In Āgrā Bāzār, a play indeed dedicated to Nazir although initially the author was thinking of a tragic play on Insha, Nazir is lavishly quoted. He is not parodied unless we consider that the delegation of his original voice to a variety of secondary utterers (fakirs, the cucumber-seller, the sweets-seller, hijra, the little girl, the kite-seller) represents a parodic treatment. But he himself to a large extent was also a parodist.

Habib Tanvir rates him so very highly because he sees him as the embodiment of Indian popular culture, in Urdu or Hīndī (1954: 6). At a time when the most celebrated form of poetry, the ghazal, was deeply indebted to the Persian structure, imagery, lexicon, topoi and feelings, with no reference at all to the Doab or Hindustan, Nazir appears as the true poet of Indian culture, with his copious use of simple and trivial words related to material culture, his bold treatment of realities unknown at that time to high poetry, and properly Indian (bandar, bhālū, totā, roṭī, paisā, khincāvaṭ, cīrīvaṭ), his knowledge of the technical names of material culture (twenty denominations of kites). Such formal and thematic qualities make Nazir in Habib Tanvir’s eyes the great voice of popular Hindustani culture, whether Urdu or Hindi (1954: 28). As the central figure of the play, he embodies the folk culture’s resistance to the ever gloomier atmosphere entailed by the new political setting in the 1810 city of Agra city, with the British taking advantage of the weak local rulers, which led to chaos and increasing poverty. The transformation of this deep dissent into resilience is achieved in Nazir’s nazm through a polymorphic use of parody at various levels.

Opening the play, the first nazm of Nazir, sung by the fakirs, sets the tone with a fragment of Nazir’s sāh āśob (1954: 47—8):

My words no longer have their usual grasp
My speech has begun to alter and trip
I am always in a sad thoughtfulness caught
And my poetry has virtually come to a halt

All around only misery, suffering and deprivation
Whom should one weep over, whom should one mention
(kiskiske dukh ko roye aur kīsī kahe bār)
(…)
Jewellers, traders, and other wealthy gents  
Who thrived by lending, are now mendicants  
\( (\text{dete the sab ko naqd, so kh\=\={a}te haim ab udh\=\={a}r}) \)  
The shops are deserted, dust lies on counter and scale  
\( (\text{b\=\={a}z\=\={a}r me\=\={m} u\=\={r}e haim pa\=\={r}\=\={i} k\=\={a}k be\=\={\=u}m\=\={\=a}r}) \)  
While desolate shopkeepers wait like captives in jail.  
\( (\text{baithe haim y\=\={u}m duk\=\={a}n\=\={o}m me\=\={m} apn\=\={i} duk\=\={a}nd\=\={a}r}) \)

Poverty has destroyed what once was a lovely city

Call me a lover or doting slave \((\text{as\=\={i}r})\), I am Agra’s native  
Call me mullah or learned knave \((\text{dab\=\={i}r})\), Agra is where I live  
Call me poor or call me fakir \((\text{fak\=\={i}r})\), I am Agra’s native  
Call me poet or simply \(\text{Naz\=\={i}r}\), Agra is where I live.

Is there any parodic dimension in this \(\text{nazm}\), which expresses a real dissent regarding the economic and political state of the city? Deploring the inner emptiness and difficulty of verbal expression may be a common topic in the poetry of the time, but the way it is related to the dire economic situation of the town is new, and the way it is depicted, almost comically through its triviality, adds to the contrast with the classical canons of elegiac lament, particularly the depiction of the grocers in front of their empty dusty counters. The main innovation is the general \(\text{topos}\), voiced in everyday language, of human physical misery, a prosaic and trivial \(\text{topos}\) never to be tackled in the high standards of that times’ poetry. These standards are humorously emphasized by the signature of the poem, in four lines full of alliterations and inner rhymes involving some sophisticated Persian or Arabic words. The fact that mendicants utter it is, of course, an extra device of parody, since it also serves to express the anxiety of having no place to ask for charity while pursuing their religious vocation \((\text{kiskis ke dukh roye, kiski kahe b\=\={a}t})\).

Similarly, in the crucial and long expected \(\text{nazm}\) on the cucumber \((\text{kak\=\={r}\=\={i}r})\), parody first results from the contrast between a very prosaic object and its metrical treatment, not to mention the poetic metaphors or literate allusions.\(^{13}\) It occurs at the end of the play, after the \(\text{kak\=\={r}\=\={i}r}\) seller, since the beginning of the play, has repeatedly asked Nazir for a poem in order to sell better. In the interim, a quasi riot ensues from the rivalry of sellers equally selling badly in the opening scene, which becomes the argument of the play. At the end of act one, the constable arrives to enquire about the “riot” and look for the guilty, then he reappears in the last sequence, when the song is heard (Tanvir 1954: 106).

\(\text{O how wondrous are the kak\=\={r}\=\={i}rs of Agra,}
(\text{ky\=\={a} py\=\={a}r\=\={i}-py\=\={a}r\=\={i} m\=\={i}\=\={\=i}h\=\={i} aur pat\=\={l}\=\={i}-pat\=\={l}\=\={i}y\=\={\=a}m})\)  
How slender and delicate, how lovely to behold,  
Like strips of sugarcane or threads of silk and gold,  
\( (\text{g\=\={a}ne ki poriy\=\={a}m, re\=\={s}am ki takliy\=\={a}m}) \)  
Like Farhad’s liquid eyes or Shirin’s slender mould,  
Like Laila’s shapely fingers, or Majnun’s tears cold.

\(^{13}\) An inverse burlesque, since originally burlesque draws from the contrast between the dignity and the grandeur of the character or the topic treated and the triviality of description.
O how wondrous are the kakris of Agra.

(kyā khūb narmā-nāzuk is āgre kī kakri

The best of course are those of Iskandra

(Aur īslīnmē khās kāfīr īskandre kī kakri)

Some are pale yellow and some lush green

(koi hārī-bhārī haimā);

Topaz and emeralds in their lustre and sheen,

Those that are round are Heer’s bangles green,

Straight ones like Ranjha’s flute ever so keen.

O how wondrous are the kakris of Agra;

Crunchy and crisp though tender to touch,

(chūne meṃ burg-e-gul, khāne meṃ kūr kūrī)

In beating the heat, the kakris helps much;

Cools the eyes, soothes the heart, I can vouch,

Call it not kakris, it’s a miracle as such.

O how wondrous are the kakris of Agra

In the initial phrasing of the seller himself, when he tries to advertise the qualities of his kakri, the Sikandra/Iskandra origin is present, as well as the silky quality – rešam kī tarah mulāyam, or the lush green – hārī-bhārī – and freshness or sweetness – tāzā, mīṭhī. The spontaneous exaggeration, involving metaphors and alliterations, of the “normal” publicity in the market, is simply enriched by Nazir (for instance the original mīṭhī “sweet” is expanded into the sugarcane comparison, and rešam “silk” set into a rhymed pattern with takliyām/ pāṭliyām/ hamsliyām/ ūṅgliyām) and overdone in the literary treatment. Here it is enriched by specifically literary allusions, among which the commonplace Laila-Majnun reference, a cliché in Persian culture; the way it is used here as a simile results in parody when the freshness of Majnun’s tears is compared to the juicy cucumber in a burlesque contrast, developing the Persian reference to Farhad’s liquid eyes14. As for the Panjabi reference to Hir-Ranjha, a lyric ballad which belongs both to high and folk culture, it sets the whole high literary referential pattern into a deshī frame, similarly reminiscent of a tragic and romantic love story. The humour emerges from the association of these incompatible spheres (the “low”/material’s depiction involves features of the “high”/spiritual referents). Rather than debasing great legends and Romanesque culture, such treatment introduces them into the world of daily life as a marker of complicity and familiarity, in a continuum between shared deshī folk culture (Hir-Ranjha), shared foreign culture (Laila-Majnun), and lesser known foreign culture (Farhad-Shirin).

The letter to the grocer, a celebration of rat chutney, is a masterpiece of the “bouffon” style, more explicitly making fun of the usual ways for sellers to advertise their goods, by substituting disgusting ingredients for the regular ones and giving them the high status of exquisite refinement, in the manner of “grotesque” style: Nazir found a rat in the acār brought back by his granddaughter, and sends it back with this nazm (Tanvir 1954: 76), in a very common language with no literary allusions and no other parodic formal signal than rhyme and metrical verse (usually a signal for “high” topoi):

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14 Majnun is the male hero of tragic love, like Farhad in both Persian lyrics, Laila and Shirin are their respected beloveds. In the Panjabi lyrical epic, Hir is the female beloved and Ranjha the male lover.
Again there is a market for rats these days!
(phir garam huā ānke bāzār cūhom kā)
I too have prepared them in various ways!
(hamne bhi kiyā khvācā taiyār cūhom kā)
I chop I pound and I mash three or four
And make such a mix that you’ll ask for more!
My rat pickle is the pride of any store!
(kyā zor mazedār hai acār cūhom kā)

The rats that I choose are large and fat
(avval to cūhe chāte hue gad ke bare haim)
Each frog I add is the size of a cat
(aur ser savā se ke memdhak bhi pare hāṃ)
Deliciously crisp and spicy and hot
(cakh dekh mere yār, ye ab kaise kare haim)
Judge for yourself how well they have rot!
(cālīs baras guzre haim tab aise sare haim)
Its price is rising, is sure to rise more
(āge jo banāyā to bikā bīs rupae ser!
barsāt meṃ bikne lagā paccīs rupae ser
jāroṃ meṃ yah bikā rahā batiīs rupae ser)
My rat pickle is the pride of any store

Apart from the vitriolic satire of price inflation at the end, responsible for people’s misery, the main purpose of the song is to make people laugh – and it works: the grocer laughs without control (beq̄abū hamsī) when reading the letter, before it is sung. Robust laughter, as an expression of free life, is indeed a constitutive marker of popular culture, along with the language of trivial and daily realities, and what is consistently parodied in the play is the ghazal culture, its romantic and desperate sadness, its abstraction and esoteric imagery.

There is one single ghazal in the play, and it is sung by Hamid at the bookseller’s shop, a place where conservative lovers of classical poetry congregate, including a Poet, a tazkār navīṣ or Chronicle-writer, busy writing a compilation of all great Urdu poets, all of whom despise Nazir’s poetry for its vulgarity, petty puns, and stupid topoi, which should not appear in poetry. The ghazal says (Tanvir 1954: 88):

Messenger, go tell her without mentioning me,
The one who loves you is dying, so sick is he.
The moment in anger she went away from me,
Why didn’t lightning strike me and I cease to be.
It must be she who goes out all dressed at this hour,
From her radiant face alone can issue the light I see
No one shed tears as I wandered in the wilderness,
(sahrā meṃ mere hāl pe koi bhī na royā)
Except blisters on my feet which wept openly.
(gar phūṭ ke royā to mere pāmv kā chālā)
When others fell she rushed to help them up again,
But when I fell there was neither help nor sympathy.
Ah, Nazir, we advised you but you listened not,
You perused the book of love too keenly.

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Although it is by Nazir, and employs a simple language far from the canonized standards of the literate poetry in Urdu circles, the ghazal is (reluctantly\textsuperscript{15}) appreciated, mostly for the simile of the weeping blister. But this simile immediately leads to a kind of poetic contest, with everyone quoting a still better treatment of it. It starts with Mir:

\begin{quote}
Thorns in that wilderness are still bathed in blood,
Where blisters on my feet had burst and wept openly
\textit{(jis daśt mem phuţā hai mere pānv kā chālā)}
\end{quote}

and continues with Insha,\textsuperscript{16} who “too has played creatively with this image, listen to this”:

\begin{quote}
Make me wander so, through the harsh wilderness of love
That blister of tears on the feet of my eyes wept openly.
\textit{(hai pāe-nazar meṇi bhī paṇā ask kā chālā)}
\end{quote}

Sauda, Mustafi, and Atish are mentioned, the latter glorified for his highbrow poetry ("there is no room for the abject, we are all kings and queens"). Now, for all such listeners, there is certainly no parody involved in Nazir’s verse on the weeping blister, there is simply a good topos already consecrated by a series of great poets, yet inferior in its treatment to Mir’s or Insha’s who have more complex and far-fetched ways of introducing the topos in a more persianized language. But for the audience, and probably the people in the bazaar, it is parodical, regardless of Mir or Insha, and Jawed Malick’s beautiful translation into English reads in this manner. Besides, the Companion – a nonconformist friend of the very conformist Poet – elsewhere criticizes the ghazal for lacking scope, and is severely blamed by the Poet for daring to attack centuries-old traditions of Iranian and Hindustani legacies.\textsuperscript{17}

Elsewhere Mir is repeatedly described (59, 65, 69) as a disillusioned man, weary of life and disgusted with the dismal culture of his city (Delhi) to such an extent that he joined the recently opened Fort William College in Calcutta, where he was busy writing “the story of the four dervishes” for the British school. This mention of the famous \textit{Bāg-o-bahār}, with a title clearly evocative of the Persian origin of the tale, along with his noble despair and wanderings, makes Mir a perfect embodiment of the ghazal culture that prevailed at that time in literate circles, and was radically opposed to the bazaar culture.

Nazir’s ghazal is not treated as a parody by the main speaker and those embodying the old canons in poetry and culture; it is paralleled in this same context of reception, by other ghazals with the same simile, again not parodies in the original but on the contrary very serious and highbrow pieces of sophisticated poetry. The simile praised here however, particularly in Insha with its immediate co-text (\textit{pāe-nazar, “the feet of the eyes”}) is reset and commented upon in a scholastic and pedantic at-

\textsuperscript{15} “If one continues to try throughout his whole life, one is bound to stumble on a good piece of verse once in a while... One can find any number of third rate poets who are presumptuous enough to tread on the path of inimitable masters”.

\textsuperscript{16} The poet (and grammarian) on whom Habib Tanvir initially wanted to write his drama.

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{ṣu arā-e-irān aur ustādzā-e-hind sādiyōn kī ravāyōm kā hamlā}, (Tanvir 1954: 62)
mosphere which makes it a parodic epitome of the old sophisticated poetry for the audience in the bazaar and in the theatre hall.

Nazir’s ghazal and its reception also serve as a counterpoint to the next nazm, sung by the kite-seller, and full of the joyful carelessness of the playful and sportive city of Agra, a very long song in everyday language, which begins as follows (Tanvir 1954: 90):

The poor, the lowly, and persons of high degree,
Every one in Agra swims and swims wonderfully!
Some float with eyes closed, dozing all the way,
Others hold cages, or on their head a popinjay (totā).
Many swim flying kites, or stringing a bead.
Some smoke hookahs, and look happy indeed,
Such marvellous things they do, and do so easily,
Everyone in Agra swims, and swims wonderfully!

After the first couplet, the chronicle-writer leaves in indignation, but passers-by begin to gather and enjoy listening, while the Poet too is furious about the piece's lack of urban culture (śahar mem nahīṃ parhā), bad diction (cucumber munching like), and marketplace writing (bāzārī qalām). After all the supporters of noble culture have left the shop, a holi song is heard (again a nazm from Nazir), as a joyful expression of popular freedom, lust for life, and direct sensuousness, welcoming sexual desire and obscene allusions without any romanticization:

Upon hearing that, the kite-seller delivers a serious ars poetica, by means of the story of the scholar who, after having taught his disciple learned sophisticated poetry for years, finally told him, now you go and wander through the streets and marketplaces and find out if there is a relation between what I taught you and what you hear there. The young poet goes, and then comes back, having seen no relation. He is sent again, and again comes back, having seen something like a vague relation. He is sent again. He comes back, illuminated: “there is nothing in the most ordinary everyday conversation which is not related to the art of poetry”. The implicit moral is that voices of both popular and learned culture, far from being separate, are or should be mutually enriching since they should speak the same language, that of real life. In this view, Nazir’s poetry is not parodic, either of the marketplace culture nor of high culture: although sung and heard in the book seller’s shop, it becomes an unauthorized transgression (except for the ghazal) not even conceivable from the ultra-conservative viewpoint, when sung in the marketplace it may trigger laughter and be appreciated as a joyful parody of high poetry.\(^{18}\)

Nazir’s poetry voices the composite culture of the market place, including its “religious” aspects from all faiths. Krishna’s childhood for instance, which is commonly sung on the occasion of a birth by the eunuchs (Hijras), is depicted by

\(^{18}\) How can high poetry, known to be esoteric and to obey the restricted code (Bernstein) of an elite, be shared by the popular culture of the marketplace, a condition for appreciating some other piece as its parody? There surely was a representation among the people of what the high canons sound like as a genre (Riffaterre 1984). Even without full access to the rhetoric and to the lexical subtleties of the highly persianized ghazals, the rhythmic pattern and basic rhetoric is well enough known for them to enjoy the simple language in such a pattern as a healthy protestation against the restricted codes of the exclusive elite culture.
the Hijras of the play in a very worldly way, gently humorous, but in no way destructive of the other “belief”. It rather re-sets within the witty popular familiarity of deities:

Milkmaids away, the little fellow had a field day
He stole into houses like a thief much skilled
Climbed on a cot and brought down the pot
That with cream or butter freshly filled
He ate some and wasted some
(makhan, malāī, dūdh, jo pāyā so khā liyā)
And some he simply spilled
(kuch khāyā kuch kharāb kiyā, kuch girā diyā)
Fabulous were Krishna’s childhood days
(aisā thā bansūrī ke bajeyyā kā bālpan)
So many tales of his naughty ways!
(kyā-kyā kahūṇ maṅiṅ kiśan khanhaiyyā kā bālpan)19

Although serious criticism is also very much present, always tinted with humour and comedy,20 the play ends with an apology for the multi-layered and contrasting nature of humankind, both at its best and worst, in a last nazm from Nazir, ādmināmā. This last song amounts to a suspension of judgment, an unusual re-appropriation of the most opposite behaviours and social status, defining man as multiple and humanity as unfathomable (parhte haim ādmi hī Qurān aur namāz yahām aur ādmi hī unkī curāte haim jūtiyām “the man who reads the Quran and preys in the mosque is indeed a man as is the man who steals his shoes”). We may read it as a passionate song of faith in humanity, or as a gently cynical acceptance of social and individual wickedness, or an expression of sceptical relativism. Habib Tanvir, who is the final utterer and speaker of a “new belief”, has extensively quoted from an uncommon poet who expressed faith in humanity even more than he criticized the prevailing norms. The critical parody of the prevailing canons in 1810 aims at debasing the elite culture which they embody because they leave no room for the creative and critical potential of folk culture which has the power of renewal. This statement is not Nazir’s. It is Habib Tanvir who implicitly says it, by depicting an atypical poet in his historical setting (cultural sterilization coincides with the loss of economic and political power in the late Mughal empire), in order, also, to voice dissent related to modern India. His is a political theatre of protest, with strong judgement and commitment, and he would not be satisfied with a mere celebration of the poet. The dramatic plot (the final discomfiture of the constable) and moreover the acting of the poems by characters who behave like the real vendors and some of whom are real vendors, modifies the original “message” conveyed by Nazir’s poetry, along with

19 The particularly witty expressions are in bold characters, the last one possibly a parody of the coded phrase of all medieval poets confessing their inability to put in words the marvels they attempt to depict. But the reduplication of the interrogative kyā gives it a definitely popular tone, and similarly does the first expression in bold kharāb kiyā, “messes”.
20 For instance: “Famed scholars, of themselves so sure,
Lose heart on becoming poor
Confused by hunger they begin to see
Day as night and A as B
(mufīṣ hue to kalmā talak bhūl jūte haim)
(pūche koī ‘ailf’ to use ‘be’ batūte haim)
the Brechtian critical distance that Habib Tanvir always manages to create in his performances\(^{21}\).

What then is the final “belief” that emerges from this way of handling quotation of a parodist/satirist poet, himself radiant with the rasa of folk culture? The dominant political and cultural norms may have failed to build a fair society, and the rich potential of folk culture can help counter this failure, which is in conformity with the very concept of his Naya Manch, a troupe of Chattisgarhi tribals, who later came to dominate the field of the contemporary protest theatre\(^{22}\).

We may conclude that parody as handled in this play is not to be correlated with postmodernism (Hutcheon 2000) any more in Nazir and Habib Tanvir than in general in non-modern cultural traditions East or West (Rabelais, Aristophanes), unless we empty both notions of their vital content. The reflexivity, part of a more general trend of inner criticism, a feature inherent in modern and postmodern parody, is not only present but crucial in the Indian tradition right from the beginnings (Ramanujan 1989[1999], Ananthamurthy 2007). When we observe it in 20th century Indian literature, we may like to correlate this form of dissent to the postmodern condition and general scepticism (Lyotard 1979), but we should also be aware that reflexivity, critical distance, and dissent, the basic ingredients of parody, are not the exclusive products our post-industrial society.

References

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\(^{21}\) For more details on the Brechtian distance in H. Tanvir, cf. Dalmia (1990), and Montaut 2012.

\(^{22}\) His nation wise popularity, although his theatre was burnt down by fundamentalists in the nineties, was acknowledged by a national homage on his death in June 2009, when was buried draped in the national flag.