

Texts of Power, Acts of Dissent: Performability and Theatricality in Nabarun Bhattacharya's Short Stories

Priyanka Basu

Introduction

Incredibly I died shrouded from the vicinity of the human eye. There was a huge raucous on the street that night. On Bijaya Dashami, Maa, was journeying back with her children (who outnumbered the regulation set by family control measures) on a truck, while causing a sea of jostling onlookers to shed bucketful of tears. It was the same truck in which “out-of-stock” sacks of rice are compelled to wander the breadth of the city, ghost-like and in the thickness of night. They cannot come out in the light of the day. Hence, the best time for them to travel between storage rooms is at midnight. Maa, likewise, is travelling at night. A bizarre symphony was created by the collective sounds of the drums, band, cymbals and crackers. Often in the course of this pandemonium, the religious enthusiasts and organizers made announcements in the manner of crying out the goddess’s victory aloud, for those who had gathered. I, too, died during this time.¹ (*Sreshtha Galpo* 21)

The short story, “Bhashan” (“The Immersion”) begins with two seemingly incongruous imageries amalgamated by the writer’s alteration between literary language and everyday parlance. The goddess is on her journey back “home,” the “out-of-stock” sacks of rice travel in the depths of night from one of their homes to the other, and the truck is a common link between the two events. The prelude to “Bhashan” however prepares the readers towards the inherent incongruity in talking of “many things.” Borrowing from Lewis Carroll’s much-acclaimed poem “The Walrus and the Carpenter” in *Alice in Wonderland* (1871), “Bhashan” indicates the ripeness of a time that urges one “to talk of many things.” Taking absurdities as its reference frame, such as those in the act of ascertaining “why the sea is boiling hot” or “whether pigs have wings”², the short story underlines what general common sense or sentiment would discern as ludicrous: the pairing of the goddess with the rice sacks and their comparability by the virtue of a truck wandering in the night-time. To beat the significance of a cultural-religious ritual (Durga Puja) to a level of malleability that suits the image of the political hushed-ness in hoarding rice sacks, is to employ absurdity in order to shock common sense and sentiment. In this sense, it turns the neatness of the objective correlatives of a celebratory ritual into an incapacity of emotive expression, as well as into the related

lifelessness of a would-be-immersed idol and a sack of rice. Undoubtedly, “Bhashan” begins with the event of a death and asserts it further to underscore the banality in re-performance of ritual.

“Bhashan” is one of the many short stories written by Nabarun Bhattacharya (1948-2014), the unprecedented maverick litterateur in the Bangla language. Defying the literary norms of institutionalized Bangla, Nabarun’s use of language jolts the reader to repeated discomfort as his prose reflects magic realistic tendencies and often goes to the extent of Gonzo journalistic reporting (e.g., in his short story, “Kaktarua”, or *The Scare-crow*). His prose points sharply at political carnage as he undermines the standardizations of literary norms to produce a genre of writing that celebrates the fluidity of narrativization. In his own words, ritual and language are tied in their repetitive and thus, banal re-performance:

Every year, as the winter is about to decamp, there is a yearly ritual with the Bangla language. Ritual means repetition. The same numbers. Similar platitudes. Same knowledgeable mastication. One feels like eloping with the winter. But what can one do? This is Bengal’s fate—talking precocious bunkum.³

As a fitting diatribe to this “relentless flat and tedious buffoonery”⁴, Nabarun emerges with his “prose of counter-insurgency” and his line-up of “subaltern saboteurs” – the *Fyatarus*.⁵ The meaning-making capacities of both ritual and language have reached an aridity that can only be re-awakened by shock therapies of linguistic havoc within which the *Fyatarus* perform their collective carnivalesque of violence on deified structures of power.

Nabarun Bhattacharya is almost immediately recognized by the virtue of his longer fictional works such as *Herbert, Lubdhak*, and *Kangal Malshat (The War Cry of Beggars)*, or, the much celebrated poetic condemnation, *E Mrityu Upatyaka Amar Desh Noy (This Valley of Death Is Not My Country)*. Often compared to the Russian writer-playwright, Mikhail Bulgakov, Nabarun’s rebellious approach is no less pronounced in the numerous short stories he wrote between 1968 and 2005 for various magazines and little magazines.⁶ Some of these short stories span only a couple of pages (e.g. *Congratulation*) and exhibit an economy of language which carefully puts across the writer’s ideology and agenda at once in sharp prose; language, here, flows from everyday parlance to slapstick and finally to slang, thus producing a distinct affect on the reader that the depiction of the abject demands. The literariness of Nabarun’s prose, in this sense, is constitutes a baring of sentiments uppermost in one’s thoughts and also of the predisposition to represent the monstrosity of contemporary times. In

the words of theatre director, Suman Mukhopadhyay who adapted Nabarun's *Herbert* onscreen (2005) and his *Kangal Malsat* onstage (2006):

The political carnivalesque and the scornful burlesque prompted me to make a play out of the novel. The roughness, rawness and the immediacy are the essence of the production. I tried to maintain the agitational-propagandist spirit in the making. It is a play of our times, black times.⁷

Performance is a political act and the potential of Nabarun's "agitational-propagandist" prose to be performed allows one to probe into the ruptures within the text that bespeak the possibilities of enactment. Performance as a responsible political act demands a close attention to the details of language and an apt representation within the context of conflicting times. As Dwight Conquergood puts it in writing about interventions in performance studies and of performance as a radical research:

The state of emergency under which many people live demands that we pay attention to messages that are coded and encrypted; to indirect, nonverbal, and extralinguistic modes of communication where subversive meanings and utopian yearnings can be sheltered and shielded from surveillance. (148)

How do we locate Nabarun's prose within this *performability* of "subversive meanings"? What qualities do his prose uphold in order to annihilate the *dispositif* of neo-capitalism? Can we read the *Fyatarus* as containing the possibilities of re-performance—"sabotage, subversion and urination at the establishment"⁸—as opposed to the relentless tediousness of meaningless ritual? Does the coupling of grim description with black humour make his texts rife with possibilities of *performable* experiments? This article wishes to understand political *performability* and *theatricality* with reference to some of the short stories of Nabarun Bhattacharya. The stories thus chosen for analysis—"Fyataru", "Basanta Utshab E Fyataru" ("Fyataru at the Spring Festival"), "Ondho Beral" ("The Blind Cat"), "Kaktarua" ("The Scare-Crow"), "Bhashan" ("The Immersion") and "Aguner Mukh" ("The Face of Fire")—reflect not only the commonality of themes between them, but also what Michel de Certeau terms as the "immense texturology" constituting the everyday, ordinary practices:

The ordinary practitioners of the city live "down below," below the threshold at which visibility begins. They walk—an elementary form of experience of this city. They are walkers, Wandersmanner, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban "text"

they write without being able to read it. These practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen... (94)

José Garcia Villa defines the contemporary short stories as “lost” short stories: “they are left dangling, unfulfilled, lost in the air.” (231) Furthermore, he stresses the quality of the short story as “fundamentally a dramatic vehicle” necessitating struggle and solution (232). To extend this understanding of the textural capacity of the short story as a dramatic vehicle to Nabarun’s short stories, is to probe into the meta-text of *performability* and *theatricality* in/through them. For example, both “Bhashan” and “Aguner Mukh” recount the predictability of a cultural ritual in its annual re-performance; “Ondho Beral” and “Kaktarua” have the seemingly inert blind cat and the scare-crow as audiences of abjection and stifling violence respectively; and both the “Fyataru” stories celebrate the subaltern saboteurs’ re-performance of insurrectionary violence in their dark humorous unfolding. Each pair of these short stories, therefore, can be read as the theatrical progression of exposition, climax and bathetic resolution. Yet, each of these short stories hold within itself the prospective of distinct individual *performability* in their celebratory antithetical pronouncement and consequent demolition. Nabarun was no writer of broiler stories as opposed to the inexorable production of “broiler plays, broiler novel, broiler poetry, broiler films, broiler criticism, broiler magazine” by clones. (*Sreshtho Galpo* 10) Nor was he a “celebrity” produced out of the fusion of clone, broiler and mediocrity – a celebrity positioned within what he himself depicts as the traitorous empire of Judas: “Judas country, Judas politician, Judas citizen, Judas judge, Judas film-director, Judas litterateur, Judas poet, Judas intellectual”. (275)⁹ On the contrary, he believed in literature’s and the litterateur’s responsibilities in cultivating a necessary consciousness of the surrounding tyrannical world-order. (11) While his prose is an indictment against the networks of cannibalising power and violence, it also signals how such indictment is bustling with real possible *performability*; the short stories in comparison to the larger works of fiction like *Herbert* and *Kangal Malsat* thus can be read within this possibility of indictment through enactment. The following section discusses the theoretical paradigms of performance as a political act in order to further understand the questions of *performability* and *theatricality* in Nabarun’s short stories.

Understanding *Performability* of Texts in the Political Context: Theoretical Frameworks

In a recent dialogue with the London-based performance artist, Ansuman Biswas at the exhibition on *The Travelling Archives* in east London¹⁰, Biswas spoke about some of his performance projects that extend theatre to the realm of political activism and that too with an eye for making meaning from common objects, symbols and events. An enlightening point in this discussion was the reference to London's past Millbank Prison which is now the site of the Tate Britain: "The original plan for Millbank Prison, which opened in 1816, was for a Panopticon. The design for the building, conceived by Jeremy Bentham in the late 18th century, would allow a single watchman to observe all inmates of an institution."¹¹ Artists Ruth Ewan and Astrid Johnston have designed the *The Darks* audio tour (approx. 50 minutes) that plays in the format of an audio guide. The tour then "investigates ideas around privacy, social control and power relations, past and present." The strategy of the audio-guided performance thus summarizes:

Narrated by Carolyn Pickles, this audio guide also features real and fictional accounts of passers-by, including novelist Charles Dickens and writer and reformer Henry Mayhew, inmates such as Irish political prisoner Dennis B Cashman (who was transported to Australia from Millbank) and one-time prison governor, Arthur Griffiths.

Words scratched onto coins by unknown prisoners are also heard among the fragmented voices that make up *The Darks*.

The Darks can be taken as an entry point into understanding the proposed concept of *performability* in the political context and to devise a theoretical framework for the reading of related texts. In a sense, *The Darks* invokes a historicity that aligns past and present power networks, surveillance strategies, and logic of domination through consent. Through the use of the audio-guide—a normalizing visitor device guiding the viewer to the space of the museum—*The Darks* subverts what in Foucauldian terms can be understood as the invisible surveillance through technology. Here, the device (through innovations in voice and sound) becomes a subversive consciousness-creating vehicle that unfolds for the audience-visitor an alternate *performability* and dark history of a space normally conceived of as a museum.

What happens when one tries to substitute consciousness with the body in performance instead? At this point, it then becomes pertinent to discuss what the role of the body constitutes of in the performance of the political, and therefore the *performability* of the

text. In his chapter entitled, “When Consciousness Is Not Enough,” Randy Martin explicates why historically people as spectators have not transformed into political actors:

Yet I contend that consciousness, while undeniably critical, is not enough to move people into the political arena. There is a political heart, more than that, a political body, that must be conjoined with mind to turn social arrest to unrest and move people to the center stage of history. It has been the neglect of this body that has made worldly drama so frightening and kept people in the role of spectator rather than political actor. (1)

This inability of the spectator to turn into the political actor is there because the networks of domination operate more through consent than by coercion in order to achieve normalization: “[t]he legions of order do not brandish weapons but bring gifts. The torture chamber dissolves into the shopping mall.” (3) In order to subvert the normativity of consensus, mostly through cultural commodities, performance needs to be taken seriously as “a way of experiencing, enacting, and embodying political activity” (9) rather than merely some kind of a metaphor. Building on Martin’s conceptual framework of perceiving performance as “any experience of social life” (11), one can see how this experience of social life is based on different relationships as E.J. Westlake puts it: “The politics of representation is the politics of multiple relationships: of the character to the actor, the character to the person being represented, the history to the story, the place to the space of performance.” (8) Both the transformation of the spectator to a political actor and the representation of relationships through performance are legitimate to the understanding of the *performability* of the text. *Performability* is enthused foremost with potentiality of the text and the language therein, and gradually the way in which it bustles with the possibility of a politically-stimulated performance. But how can we conceptualize *performability* in performance and apply it with reference to political texts (here, Nabarun’s short stories)?

Performability is not a neologism in the present context of this article and has been employed variously, from the analysis of computing and communication systems (see, John F. Meyer 139-156) to the possibilities of performance in a play-text (e.g., Seneca’s *Thyestes*, or in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*) (see, Riemer A Faber 427-442; Janette Dillon 74-86). In the present context of this discussion, however, the concept of *performability* is based on the qualities of the text and its language to become a responsible and politically-charged piece of

performance. Do the short stories chosen for analysis in this context offer such possibility? Following from the formulations of Randy Martin, this article seeks to point towards a pattern in studying Nabarun's short stories as performance texts – social arrest to unrest and finally to celebratory annihilation. Set within this pattern and logic of progression the short stories can be seen as three paired units: “Bhashan”-“Aguner Mukh”, “Ondho Beral”-“Kaktarua”, “Fyataru”-“Basanta Utshab E Fyataru”. The choice of such pairing units is however directed by the scope and limitations of this article. The exclusivity in their selection for discussion, on the other hand, is not random but essential in devising a framework through which the numerous other short stories of Nabarun can be modelled for analysis and embodiment through performance. This article, therefore, does not attempt to be an ambitious precursor to the further study of Nabarun Bhattacharya's works in their social/cultural/political/*performable* contexts and instead wishes to initiate a dialogue with the texts in their *performable* possibilities. Having clarified this position, it is now pertinent to take into account (though briefly) as to what was Nabarun's own take on performance, especially theatre.

Nabarun's elucidations on films (especially those of Ritwik Ghatak) unlike the availability of his views on contemporary theatre, are long, intuitive as well as informative. However, his brief¹² estimation of contemporary Bengali theatre is worth considering in order to discuss the issue of *performability* in his stories:

It is funny how the names “theatrics” and “hypocrites” have an audible similarity. I feel that recently our theatre is becoming too dependent on celebrities. That theatre is a collaborative art, and those who are related to the stage—known as walkers-on—who keep the stage alive – no one speaks of them anymore. We know there can be one or a couple of prima ballerinas, but it is also true that behind the successful productions of Bolshoi theatre a thousand workers perform laboriously.¹³

Theatre, for Nabarun (as it can be deduced from his views), is therefore consists of the material labour of the performer-worker as well as the worker-performer. One might find it pertinent in connection with this idea of labour to conceive of the “performative labour” of the performance-worker, though not spelt out in Nabarun's brief comment on contemporary Bengali theatre. Alan Bryman defines “performative labour” as “the rendering of work by managements and employees alike as akin to a theatrical performance in which the workplace is construed as similar to a stage” and that it creates “the experience economy” where “[the]

work of the person who stages the experience is crucial for the experience to remain in the customer's memory" (104). *Performability* of the text precedes this "performative labour" which is then embodied in the actual act of performance – a political act. In the subsequent sections of this paper the short stories are discussed within this broad reference frame of *performability* as well as through the themes of (i) the banality of re-performance and ritual as social arrest; (ii) the spectacle of violence generating unrest; (iii) the passage from consciousness to body and the consequent theatricality of celebratory annihilation.

The Banality of Re-Performance and Ritual as Social Arrest: "Bhashan" and "Aguner Mukh"

...Nobody exchanges stories anymore. Nobody tells a story anymore. Although one was meant to listen to stories and fall asleep while still listening to them. There is no story-telling anymore. A story cannot even be successfully constructed even after much labour. Stories also come as one sleeps. They leave as one awakes. But, everything is coming to an end. There were stories to tell, stories that could be told, may be someone someday will tell them– everything is coming to an end. (274)

The passage of story-telling from a meaningful socio-cultural ritual to meaninglessness forms the crux of Nabarun's indictment against the "loss" of stories. The hopelessness, lament and angst surrounding this loss of the ritual of telling and exchanging stories echoes his critique of the Judas world with its broiler, clone and mediocrity. Ritualization is a process that is designed and orchestrated to privilege a set of socio-cultural practices over other quotidian practices. However, this quality of the ritual as a performance is lost as it falls prey to the banality of re-performance under social arrest. Consider, for example the compulsory re-performance of the recorded *Chandipath* (1958) by Birendrakrishna Bhadra at the traffic signals of Kolkata before and after the Durga Puja, thus removing it from the specific performance context of the *Mahalaya* (the commencement of the festival). Another pertinent example could be the everyday re-playing of Tagore songs at the same traffic signals in the form of cultural assertion and thus the conditioning of the urban populace. In both these cases, the *performability* of the ritual is lost and the ritual event transforms to social arrest after continuous re-performance, thus detaching its meaningful relationship to the community.

Nabarun captures this banality of re-performance in "Aguner Mukh", a story that is set within the festive event of the Durga Puja in October 1972. Akin to his juxtaposition of two incongruous imageries of the idol of the goddess and the rice sacks in his other short

story, *Bhashan*, Nabarun begins, here, by a blunt declaration: “As the puja approaches I feel, like everybody else, that a lot is going to happen, but ultimately nothing actually happens.” (216) The futility of the event is immediately asserted by the protagonist’s encounter with a recorded female voice on the telephone, conveying best wishes for *Bijaya Dashami* (the end of the festival). Nabarun conveys the thoughts of the protagonist, an unnamed youth, thus:

The numbers that I was dialling, the six-digit numbers of those times, had no meaning. Only that female voice was meaningful. That was the dial-tone of that eventful day. Who was that female through whose voice Calcutta Telephones conveyed its best wishes for *Bijaya*? In the year 1972? Hello! Can anybody tell me? (216)

“Bhashan” and “Aguner Mukh” were written in 1968 and 2001 for the magazines *Parichay* and *Ebong Sayak* respectively. “Bhashan” is a story told by a dead lunatic as he witnesses the activities surrounding his own corpse by a fellow female lunatic (*pagli*), pedestrians, on-lookers, and the police. The story unfolds as the *pagli* guards the corpse in the open park and cries over it thus turning the event into an amusing spectacle for the on-lookers. At the end of the story, as the corpse is taken away by the police in the black vehicle, it can still hear the *pagli* crying. “Aguner Mukh” focusses on a chance encounter between the unnamed protagonist and a random poor young boy exhibiting his fire-trick as part of the puja procession. The unnamed protagonist lends a helping hand to the young boy as he mistakenly consumes petrol in the course of showing his fire-trick. A brief dialogue follows between them which ends soon as the boy recovers from his nauseating condition and with a promise of another meeting “up or down” the way sometime. The story ends with the unnamed protagonist’s confession as to how that second encounter never happened again.

One of the most visible literary devices that Nabarun repeatedly employs in his narratives is that of the placement of a current event in the story with a past event of political-historical significance. The effect of pointing towards the current event in the story through this literary practice of amplification not only achieves a political significance of the past historical event, but also places the current event/character within the aftermath of the past event; the banality of re-performance is thus emphasized through this amplification. Consider, for example, the dead lunatic in “Bhashan” as he explains post-death why he could not listen to the songs of his fellow *pagli* properly: “The reason is that there is a busy wide road facing the park where I died. It has big buses, trams and many other vehicles running on

it. Some convoys also passed by during the last War.” (21) Consider, also, the reference to Molotov cocktail and flame throwers as Nabarun describes how the poor young boy shows his fire-trick:

This trick contains the key to Molotov cocktail...The other military use of this trick is flame thrower. It is unparalleled in burning the thatched houses of the unsophisticated rustics. The Vietnamese experienced this fully, thanks to the operations of the American military. (217)

The banality of re-performance is at once abruptly shaken to hark a political consciousness by such historical alignment. The reference to war-time convoys in “Bhashan” follows from the description of the ritual of immersion during which the lunatic had passed away. Similarly, the reference to flame throwers, Molotov cocktail, and the related Vietnam War follows from the meaningless conglomerate of re-performances in the religious festival, and the annual access of the rural cultural exotica (the drummers) for urban spectators: “...this is how the rustics come to the city of Kolkata and after re-establishing Bengal’s pride and the complacency of Bengali cultural heritage, return to their Africa; this happens every year, this has been happening every year.” (217)

G J Ashworth considers commodification as a process of transforming history to heritage (16), while Susan Stewart points to the pertinence of souvenirs and miniatures in the creation of cultural heritage: “the nostalgic desire to present the lower classes, peasant life, or the cultural other within a timeless and uncontaminable miniature form.” (66) In Nabarun’s prose the nostalgia for miniature and the materiality of this transformation is achieved through first, the imagistic representation of re-performance (through commodification) and then, to the historic past from which the ritual has been removed though not completely. Although not in the sense of bridging the discord through a “parliament of things” (see, Bruno Latour 142-145), Nabarun does point continually to a discord that breeds political unconsciousness, inactivity, and an opium-induced banal re-performance. The title “Bhashan” and the repetition of the word towards the end of “Aguner Mukh”—“*bhashan, bhashan, bhashan*”—negate the sense of regeneration and birth that the ritual of idol-immersion carries within itself. Undoubtedly, therefore, the central event in “Bhashan” is of death and that of the loss of an encounter in “Aguner Mukh”, thus signifying the impossibility of *performability*. The following section shows how two of Nabarun’s other

short stories show the movement towards consciousness and consequent unrest from this impossibility and social arrest.

The Spectacle of Violence Generating Unrest: “Ondho Beral” and “Kaktarua”

The government has no alternative except to intensify its repression. The police networks, house searches, the arrest of suspects and innocent persons, and the closing off of streets make life in the city unbearable. The military dictatorship embarks on massive political persecution. Political assassinations and police terror become routine.¹⁴

In the *Minimanual of Urban Guerrilla*, Carlos Marighella shows how an urban guerrilla differs radically from a criminal who “benefits personally from his actions, and attacks indiscriminately without distinguishing between exploiters and the exploited, which is why there are so many ordinary people among his victims.”¹⁵ The context of violence is therefore what distinguishes the guerrilla from the criminal. Nabarun’s short story, “Kaktarua” (published in 1979 in *Saptaho*) which also makes a necessary clarification in the prelude—“None of the sections of this story is fictional” (61)—begins with this assertion of the context of violence. It depicts an incident from 15th August, 1979¹⁶ in which a number of agricultural labourers and Harijan leaders were attacked and killed by the feudal lords and police force of Bihar. A vehicle consisting of three of the zamindar’s appointed criminals approaches in the dead of night to the house of the Harijan leader, Nirbhay Paswan. Nirbhay is beheaded and the head is carried back with the murderers as a proof of the act and also to erase any evidence that they had killed him. What follows from this political murder is a sea of unrest and a series of events which further politicize and mediatize the violence. Nabarun writes of the consequent unrest by fellow villagers and the mediatization of the event in the following words:

People were coming from far away villages. As their numbers kept increasing, the region could hold no more people...they lifted the bed with Nirbhay’s beheaded corpse on it. Although it was broad daylight, they carried with themselves *mashals* and kerosene which they had brought with them in large numbers...As they reached Saraibajar they set fire on Thakur Dharmanath’s lentil godown, grocery and cloth shop. One of Thakur’s tractors was approaching, loaded with lentils from Bishanpur. They set that on fire as well. They also incinerated an ambassador. Thakur’s eldest

son was on duty that day. He had to be killed as well since he had opened fire with his revolver. (64-65)

When this news is published in a renowned daily in Kolkata—that Kolkata, where everybody knows everything—the incident of murder and incineration in a village in Bihar appears in such brief format in one corner of the newspaper that it is impossible for the reader to fathom what exactly has happened. First of all, no one wants to read it. And if they read it by chance, they would feel that a large mob with criminal motives in some remote, uncivilized region of Bihar has set things on fire and killed a shopkeeper – such is the fun in receiving the news and writing about it...Our chivalrous press is struggling 24*7 to bring independence to this country, but the incident of the murder of agricultural labourers and Harijan leaders like Ganpat Ram, Nirbhay Paswan, Bharat Bind and others by the armed forces of Bihar's zamindar on 15th August, 1979 does not find even a millimetre of space in their newspapers. (65)

The discrepancy between the act of unrest and that of its deference in writing (or reporting) is what Nabarun reminds the readers in (non)-fictionalizing the killing. It is by bringing in the seemingly non-functional entity of the scare-crow that he points towards the necessity of consciousness as a pre-text for *performability* – the *performability* of unrest. The scare-crow is a passive on-looker, his grimace shows him laughing, and he cannot vote although he is a witness of everything from the murder to the unrest to the deference of social justice.

Like this village scare-crow who is a witness to the process of unrest following from the cold-blooded violence, the “ondho beral” or the blind cat (in “Ondho Beral”) performs a similar function of inactivity while it thrives on the remains of food in a small mofussil hotel. “It is not possible to know if it was blinded in a battle with some other cat or is it a condition from birth. It is not an urban cat. It is a cat from a mofussil by the river which is wrapped in a fishy smell.” (184) The scare-crow, on the other hand, is an obvious lifeless on-looker who also loses an eye as the murderers nervously and aimlessly shoot everywhere in the rush of carrying Nirbhay Paswan's head back. There is no real act of violence in “Ondho Beral” which is a story of the blind cat as it feels familiar people and the surroundings of the hotel, and waits for a possible high tide to drift away in order for it to survive. The reference to violence in the story comes in the form of the recounting of an incident in which seven kittens in England were subjected to medical violence to fulfil the purpose of an experiment:

A scientific study was conducted in England on seven new-born kittens. The experiment was carried out by the safety and security department. We know that the kittens get their vision after a few days of their birth. The vision of those seven kittens were, however, terminated. Their eyes were sewed up and sealed. They were then allowed in that condition to grow up a bit and a number of experiments were conducted on them – like how do they respond to a loud noise, how do they respond if they are singed, what are their actions and reactions to different types of assault, etc. Thereafter they were killed and their brains were studied minutely to understand the effect of the assaults that were conducted on them in their blinded condition. As the animal-lovers of England became aware of these experiments, they protested vehemently and demanded that such violent experiments be stopped immediately. The blind cat heard all this but did not understand a word of it. (188)

The inability of the blind cat to comprehend the significance of this medical experimental violence and the protests following it is comparable to the way the scare-crow fails to act against what he sees. Both of them are bound by a lack, of lifelessness and sightlessness, and yet they become the foil for whom Nabarun aims his indictment – people who fail to channelize their consciousness to political action. As Randy Martin says, “At home we watch while the world screams. We sit and soak while the earth aches.” (1) It is “stage fright” as Martin further explains that arrests the transformation of consciousness to political action, the movement of *performability* to real performance. Both the scare-crow and the blind cat symbolize this potential of *performability* as eye-witnesses to violence and unrest. However, Nabarun’s (non)-fictionalized document against violent does not stop at the indication of the consciousness that fails to perform. Instead, he moves ahead with this indictment to allow it to result into the real performance, the celebratory annihilation. To achieve this progression, he creates his brigade of “subaltern saboteur”—the *Fyatarus*—who actually recuperate, attack and rejoice thus making the *performable* a theatrical event. The following section discusses the third and final unit of the short stories as what can be understood as the theatricality of celebratory annihilation.

The Theatricality of Celebratory Annihilation: “Fyataru” and “Basanta Utshab E Fyataru”

Mounds are these half-human, half-plant mutants that came to life about fifty thousand years ago, when an ape-man masturbated in a field of flowers, and up sprang

these creatures, and they're called Mounds. Since then, many of them have died off for various reasons, but the main cause of death of Mounds is the premature death caused by creatures called Vegans who are evil creatures who can't stand Mounds at all.¹⁷

In the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, the drawings of the Afro-American visual artist, Trenton Doyle Hancock were recently displayed as part of the exhibition – *Skin and Bones, 20 Years of Drawing*.¹⁸ A large part of the exhibition dealt with the character of Torpedoboy, a representative Mound, in his “Encounter with Vegans.” Torpedoboy, in Hancock’s own words is a superhero; “he can fly, he can lift things.” “Encounter with Vegans” serializes in a narrative fashion how Torpedoboy sabotages the Vegans’ gathering at a picnic:

ONE DAY WHILE PATROLLING THE SEWERS FOR SCUM, TORPEDOBOY CAME ACROSS A BUNCH OF VEGANS SEATED AT A PICNIC TABLE. THEY WERE ENJOYING A FRESH BATCH OF TOFU BLOCKS. THE HEAD VEGAN AT THE TABLE WAS DR.-O-TOFU OILS.

IN ONE BLASPHEMOUS SWIPE, TORPEDOBOY SCOOPED UP AN ARMLOAD OF TOFU FROM THE VEGANS’ TABLE. “OUR FOOD LIST!” YELLED THE VEGANS.

Torpedoboy, therefore, manifests the subversive qualities that hold in opposition to the Vegans, a carefully chosen name for those who belong to the upper quarters of the hierarchy of social class. Nabarun’s characterization of the *Fyatarus* resemble the Torpedoboy to a large extent in the way they aspire and attempt to sabotage the privileged practices of the upper quarters. Through the *Fyatarus* who sabotage, create a havoc, fart and urinate on the establishment, Nabarun creates a phantasmagoria that transforms the *performable* to the performed. *Fyatarus* are undoubtedly “a political chorus which permits a cacophony of voices” (Randy Martin 2), but they are also a distinct for being able to assert their bodily presence in the most Rabelaisian manner.

In his two short stories “Fyataru” (1995; published in *Proma*) and “Basanta Utshab E Fyataru” (2004; published in *Aksha Ei Samay*), Nabarun sketches the *Fyatarus* as entities beyond social control. In “Fyataru”, Madan who is already a member of this saboteur clan

initiates D S into becoming a member. Nabarun underlines the potentiality of becoming a *Fyataru* in the following dialogue between D S and Madan:

Madan: ...You have become a good *Fyataru*. You will become efficient since you're learning at an alarming speed.

D S: I can't even understand how I became one.

Madan: You need to have proper qualifications. When you go to big offices they make you wait and delay unnecessarily in meeting you. You are no better—you abuse them in your mind, dig into your nose and rub it on the chair, tear the foam of the chair in between your nails, tell me, haven't you done all this?

D S: Yes. Done that.

Madan: Damage. Damage things whenever you can. You have to remember this. We recruit those who are able to do this. (155-156)

Through the mantra of *fyat fyat shnai shnai*, the *Fyatarus* fly and infiltrate spaces such as the Floatel – a floating hotel on the Ganges where the distinguished urban citizens party through the night. Nabarun enlists the guests thus: “NRI sahibs, dancer, smuggler, haoladar, fashion designer, model, politician, beautician, owner, mafia, DSDD, PA to pimp, pimp of MOU, MP, MLA, coach, gigolo, publisher, court poet, king, queen...” (158) On this list of distinguished guests—products of the neo-liberal economy—the *Fyatarus* direct their assault by dropping objects like human shit, broom, filth, a discarded toothbrush, bed pan, remains of trimmed hair from the beauty salon etc. Likewise, in “Basanta Utshab E Fyataru”, the *Fyatarus* themselves do not sabotage the event of spring festival in a posh urban housing, but mobilize a host of slum-dwellers from the neighbouring shanties to disrupt the event. The mob attacks the cultural function by pelting bricks, glass bottles, and tea cups while the three *Fyatarus*—Madan, Purandar Bhat and D S—laugh at the mayhem as they watch from the roof of Himgiri Apartment.

If we understand theatricality as radicalizing the neatness of performance and allowing the spectator to a self-conscious perception, every act of sabotage by the *Fyatarus* (like Torpedoboy's attack on the Vegans) is infused with theatricality. The *Fyatarus* also come under domination sometimes as a consequence to this theatricality, e.g. D S is arrested by the Kolkata police after the *Fyatarus*' attack on Floatel. However, the *Fyatarus* are also able to trounce social control: Madan approaches D S in his prison cell and reminds him of

the mantra that helps them fly. Nabarun ends his story *Fyataru* with a simple indication- “The lock-up had a window.” (159) If *Fyataru* ends with this potentiality of the saboteurs to escape the forces of social control, “Basanta Utshab E Fyataru” re-asserts the theatricality as a consequence of this escape. The spring festival is clearly partitioned between the suave high culture of the urban elite of Himgiri Apartment and that of the Dionysian euphoria of the lumpen proletariat. The *Fyatarus*, here, are potential catalysts or mediators, transforming the performability of the collective angst of the slum-dwellers into the theatricality of annihilation; rather than the *Fyatarus*, the slum-dwellers as an oppressed class of urban inhabitants become the political actors of the performance. As the spring festival programme ends in a fiasco, the three *Fyatarus* inhabit the flat of fellow comrade Nabani Dhar to celebrate the annihilation with fish fries. If Torpedoboy is conceived through a cartoon-narrative, a visual art performance, Nabarun sketches his *Fyatarus* through dark humour, slapstick and parody – a *performability* of language itself which has thus seen the representation of the *Fyatarus* on-stage and on-screen as explicating the theatrical possibilities of Nabarun’s narrative.

Conclusion

I watched one immersion after the other as I stood at the edge of the footpath...a band of young children, playing on their little flutes, the tune a patriotic one, when you see them you feel as if they are little fascists marching on...rich urbane youth trying to embody the lumpen for just one evening...(217)

With an eye for minute and descriptive detail, Nabarun negates any set literary standard of the Bengali language through his depiction of incongruity. The *performability* of his language allows the reader to read his depictions as separate montages, flashbacks and shot-reverse-shots. Nabarun’s short stories are, therefore, essential “dramatic vehicles” embedded in *performability*. This article has tried to discuss a handful of Nabarun’s short stories within the themes of performability, re-performance, ritual, violence and theatricality. In doing so, the stories have been taken as paired units to highlight a movement from exposition to climax and finally to a bathetic resolution. *Performability*, in this regard, has been taken as a concept rather than a model for analysis of literary texts. As a result, the reading of *performability* with respect to Nabarun’s short stories needed a prior conceptualization. This article has attempted to understand *performability* through the theoretical concepts of analysing political performances. Nabarun is first and foremost a literary activist and his potentially

performative texts cannot be appropriately analysed without a framework for reading texts of performance. Once this framework has been set, and the nature of *performability* has been assessed, theatricality emerges as another fundamental theme in reading some of these stories. The short stories cannot be mapped under any strict literary categorization. On the other hand, they can be read easily and thematically if they are primarily identified as *performable* documentations of contemporary conflicts.

The challenges and difficulties in reading, understanding and analysing Nabarun's short stories through the concept of *performability* has been mostly due to the lack of research on the writer. As a result of this dearth of an absolutely necessary archive of references on his large body of work, this article has often resorted to references from other larger global cultural texts and performances (e.g. *The Darks* tour or the Torpedoboy) mainly in order to achieve a comparable model as also to ascertain the relevance of Nabarun's works within the broader disciplines of literary, cultural and performance studies. Given this attempt to study Nabarun in a new methodological approach, the chosen short stories have not been scrutinized amply in many ways; the scope and limitations of this article also contribute towards this selective analysis. What this paper has tried to do alternatively is to tease out some of the themes through which the progression (though not chronological) of Nabarun's short stories can be seen as performance texts. It is interesting that two of Nabarun's larger fictions have already been adapted in two different performance media, and a third documentary (by the director Q) on the writer himself is under production. Such initiatives in depictions through performances further justify why and how Nabarun's texts are relevant scripts of political performances, and this article has been a study in explicating this relevance through the examples of his short stories.

Notes:

¹ Translation mine. All translations in this paper, unless otherwise mentioned, are mine.

² Both of these quotes are taken from Lewis Carroll's poem "The Walrus and the Carpenter" in *Alice in Wonderland*.

³ See, "Aquarium" in *Humanities Underground*, <<http://humanitiesunderground.org/aquarium/>>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ I have borrowed the phrase "subaltern saboteur" for *Fyatarus* from Aninda Purakayastha (2015: 99). Purakayastha also describes Nabarun's prose as a prose of counter-insurgency.

6 For a chronological list of these stories as they appeared in various magazines, see Nabarun Bhattacharya 15-17.

7 See, Suman Mukhopadhyay, <http://www.sumanmukhopadhyay.com/inside-film-theatre_kangal.asp>.

8 See, Purakayastha 90.

9 The lines are taken from Nabarun's another short story, *Shob Shesh Hoyer Jachhe*, 273-277.

10 For details on *The Travelling Archive in East London* exhibition, see <<http://www.richmix.org.uk/whats-on/event/the-travelling-archive-in-east-london/>>.

11 See, <<http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/tateshots-darks>>.

12 The quotation has been transcribed and translated from Nabarun's views on contemporary Bengali theatre available on YouTube. [<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h9tgqXeW0tw>>]

13 See, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h9tgqXeW0tw>>.

14 See, the section on "Popular Support" in the *Minimanual of Urban Guerrilla* <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marighella-carlos/1969/06/minimanual-urban-guerrilla/ch38.htm>>.

15 See, the section on "A Definition of the Urban Guerrilla" in *Ibid.* <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marighella-carlos/1969/06/minimanual-urban-guerrilla/ch01.htm>>.

16 Note that 1979 was also the year of the Marichjhapi massacre of refugees from East Pakistan.

17 See, <<http://www.art21.org/texts/trenton-doyle-hancock/interview-trenton-doyle-hancock-storytelling-characters-and-colors>>.

18 See, <<http://www.studiomuseum.org/exhibition/trenton-doyle-hancock-skin-and-bones-20-years-drawing>>.

Works Cited:

- Ashworth, G J. "From History to Heritage – From Heritage to Identity: In Search of Concepts and Models." In *Building a New Heritage: Tourism, Culture and Identity in the New Europe*. Eds. P.L. Ashworth, G.J. & Larkham. London: Routledge, 1994, 13-30. Print.
- Bhattacharya, Nabarun. *Sreshtha Galpo [Best Stories]*. Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 2014. Print.
- , "Aquarium." In *Humanities Underground*. Humanities Underground, 2012. Web. 15 July 2015. Translated by HUG.
- Bryman, Alan. *The Disneyization of Society*. London: SAGE, 2004. Print.
- Certeau, Michel de. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984. Print.
- Conquergood, Dwight. "Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research." *The Drama Review* 46.2 (Summer 2002): 145-156. Web. 15 July 2015.
- Dillon, Janette. "Is There a Performance in this Text?" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 45.1 (Spring 1994): 74-86. Web. 15 July 2015.
- Hancock, Trenton Doyle. "Storytelling—Characters and Colours." *Art21*. Art21, 2011. Web. 15 July 2015.
- , "Skin and Bones, 20 Years of Drawing." *Studio Museum*. Studio Museum, 2015. Web. 15 July 2015.
- Ewan, Ruth. "TateShots: The Darks." *Tate*. Tate, 20 June 2014. Web. 15 July 2015.
- Faber, Riemer A. "The Description of the Palace in Seneca "Thyestes" 641-82 and the Literary Unity of the Play." In *Mnemosyne, Fourth Series* 60.3 (2007): 427-442. Web. 15 July 2015.
- Latour, Bruno. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 1993. Print.
- Marighella, Carlos. *Minimanual of Urban Guerrilla*. 1969. *Marxists Internet Archive*. Web. 15 July 2015.

- Martin, Randy. *Performance as Political Act: The Embodied Self*. New York: Bergin and Garvey, 1990. Print.
- Meyer, John F. "Performability: A Retrospective and Some Pointers to the Future." *Performance Evaluation* 14 (1992): 139-156. Web. 15 July 2015.
- Mukhopadhyay, Suman. "Kangal Malsat." *Suman Mukhopadhyay*. Suman Mukhopadhyay, 2013. Web. 15 July 2015.
- Purakayastha, Anindya Shekhar. "Fyataru and Subaltern War Cries: Nabarun Bhattacharya and the Rebirth of the Subject." *Sanglap: Journal of Literary and Cultural Enquiry* 1.2 (2015): 90-102. Web. 15 July 2015.
- Roy Chowdhury, Anirban. "Nabarun Bhattacharya on Contemporary Bengali Theatre." Online Video Clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 22 Aug, 2012. Web. 15 July 2015.
- Stewart, Susan. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993. Print.
- "The Travelling Archive in East London." *Rich Mix*. Rich Mix, 2015. Web. 15 July 2015.
- Villa, José Garcia. "The Contemporary Short Story." *Prairie Schooner* 10.3 (Fall 1936): 231-233. Web. 15 July 2015.
- Westlake, E.J. "Mapping Political Performances: A Note on the Structure of the Anthology." In *Political Performance: Theory and Practice*. Ed. Susan C. Haedicke, Deirdre Heddon. Avraham Oz and E.J. Westlake. Amsterdam, New York: International Federation for Theatre Research. 2009. 7-15. Print.

Priyanka Basu

SOAS, University of London

priyankabasu85@gmail.com

© Priyanka Basu 2015