THE PHOBIC AND THE EROTIC: THE POLITICS OF SEXUALITIES IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

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CHALLENGING THE HETERONORM IN ART: AMRITA SHER-GIL AND BHUPEN KHAKHAR

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Posthumous recognition is not the only commonality Amrita Sher-Gil and Bhupen Khakhar share. As artists, their contribution provides an alternative to the heternormative depiction of sexuality in the field of visual arts. Both are pioneers, not only as artists but as the first modern artists to voice an alternative sexuality; their contribution is rightly seen in art as historically significant. But in the context of the queer movement it must be said that neither artist took an openly activist stand.

Sher-Gil belonged to an era in which the movement for women's rights was in its infancy—abortion was still illegal; women were a part of India's struggle for independence still clearly thought of as secondary citizens with little or no access to the public domain. Sher-Gil's bohemian lifestyle was not considered normative. In fact, her very presence as a woman artist challenged the male-dominated practice of easel painting. That her work forms part of a queer consciousness is a fortunate fallout for the queer community, and her covertly practised bisexuality only stands to reinforce her aura as one of India's early non-conformists. However, the bourgeois climate in which Sher-Gil grew up was considered to be more permissive. She did have access to more independence than the average Indian woman of her time although pressures to live a settled and domestic life were nonetheless present, an observation substantiated by Sher-Gil's marriage to her cousin, Victor Egan. Despite her fight for an independent position as an autonomous sexual being, she did 'give in' to social pressures. Her flamboyant lifestyle during her college years was often passed off as youthful exuberance.

Khakhar, on the other hand, belonged to post-Independence India. The country was emerging as a global, developing nation and the queer movement was just finding its feet by the late 1980s when he came out of the closet. Yet he chose to practise his activism through his art. He was not a placard-holding rallyist; he lived quietly with his partner and, in the latter half of his career, openly practised art with a very strong homoerotic content. That in itself challenged the heteronormative social system.

One must also acknowledge that Khakhar's initial years as a queer man were spent in the closet and his position as a 'male' made accessible to him various privileges, like the right to choose a profession of his own or his decision not to marry. When Khakhar 'outed' himself, though, he ran a genuine risk of losing out on all those privileges. But the family did not disinherit him and the emerging global scenario secured his position as a queer artist in the international art scene. Which is why it is important to note that both artists must be viewed in the context of the socio-political conditions that were prevalent in their respective lifetimes.

While it is easy to see Khakhar's position as a more evolved and avant-garde artist, Sher-Gil's achievements came at a time when she had no predecessors. Khakhar also had a longer period in which to realize his potential while Sher-Gil did not have time on her side. The purpose of this essay is to celebrate and acknowledge the sheer dynamism of their presences—the significant body of work that has been left behind by each artist, and the truly inspiring and brave lives they lived.

AMRITA SHER-GIL

Hungary February 1934

My dear Mummy

I must confess, that I agree fully with you about the disadvantage of sexual relations with a man and I need somehow to physically meet my sexual needs . . . So I thought I would have something with a female when the opportunity arises and to be quite frank . . . I thought that Marie Louise was such an abnormal type of woman . . . but she is not a lesbian. She is a curious type of a person. I still have no idea about her sexual life, for she keeps avoiding the subject . . . and I begin to draw the conclusion that she doesn't have any sort of sexual life.

(Amrita Sher-Gil. From Mulk Raj Anand writing for Marg Publications, Bombay, 1971.)

This excerpt from Sher-Gil's letter to her Hungarian mother Marie Antoinette, appeared on a plaque as part of a recent exhibition of the late painter's work and memorabilia. Placed beside a self-portrait of the woman in question, Marie Louise Chanessy, it was one of the first really public—though still restrained to art circles only—declaration of Sher-Gil's proclivity and desire for women.

Marie Louise was Sher-Gil's close friend and colleague in Paris, at the Ecole des Beaux Arts where the two studied European painting and revelled in the influence of the Impressionists and a busy social life at the roadside cafes. While one can tell from the letter itself that Sher-Gil clearly identifies herself as different from this 'curious' type of person whom she

is quite sure is not a lesbian, she openly states her intention of finding out if the two could, in fact, explore a sexual relationship. Although one never learns whether or not such a relationship developed between them (since her family destroyed much of her correspondence with Channessy), this piece of text is important. Besides being the first written voicing of her desire to 'experiment' with an alternative lifestyle and sexuality, it provides one with a key that opens her work to further readings of her references to homoerotic subtexts in many of her paintings.

Her nephew Vivan Sundaram, an artist-activist living in New Delhi, wrote: 'In a mood of reaction she felt and wrote that perhaps a relationship with women may be more pure and was drawn into an involvement with a pianist friend (Edith Lang). Although not consciously, women often figured in her work, portrayed in their loneliness with their fears and secret longings . . . yet at the same time she continued to search for a satisfactory relationship with men' (*Marg*, March 1972). While Sundaram puts into words what others have only hinted at (the 'involvement' with Lang), the effort to underplay her so-called 'unconscious' portrayal of women, as well as her 'brief encounters' with women, is quite clear.

Perhaps the overwhelming status of being India's first woman painter who was given national and international acclaim tends to overshadow this less talked about aspect of her character, her sexuality. 'So substantial is the myth created around Amrita Sher-Gil that there is a tendency to forget she was only in her teens when she did canvases that were conventional though competent and at times unresolved,' says Rupika Chawla in her essay titled 'Tragedy and Myth of Amrita Sher-Gil'. Others argue that she got early recognition due to her easy access to the inner circle of the elite petite bourgeoisie, a class that she herself belonged to. Her friendship and discussions with eminent historian Karl Khandalavala were much publicized and was one of the defining factors for her journey as an artist, since Khandalavala aided her in her process of deschooling from the Western European approach to a more indigenous idiom. Even if her contribution as an artist remains unresolved, due to her early demise, her persona, which was often larger than life, her achievements and her historical importance are irrefutable.

From the age of five, Sher-Gil started drawing and painting. At eight, she was a serious and withdrawn child who preferred books, toys and the company of adults to that of other children. Her mixed parentage added to her exotic aura. Her Sikh father, Umrao Singh Sher-Gil, was an intellectual, a Gandhian philosopher and an avid photographer, while her Hungarian mother, an opera singer, cultivated a vibrant milieu of socialites, writers and musicians while the family was living in Paris in the

1930s. It also triggered cross-cultural references in Sher-Gil's paintings. Some were dilemmas that she addressed in her art and writing; others, factors which just served to enrich her painting and make it more layered.

Sher-Gil's early work, done between the age of 11 and 14, reflect a growing awareness of herself. Her women, in particular, are drawn with faces tense with suppressed emotion. The family recognized her prodigious talent and moved to Paris in 1930 so that Amrita could pursue her studies there, first under Pierre Vallan and later, at the Ecole des Beaux Arts under Lucian Simon.

She revelled in her role as India's first woman painter with a vivacious, flamboyant public life. Her arrogant statement, 'If Paris belongs to Picasso and Matisse, India belongs to me,' is still remembered in art circles. She did claim the role of a nationalist on a 'discovery of India' when she returned to India after training in Paris. Being half-Hungarian certainly proved to be a driving factor. Born in Budapest in 1913, Sher-Gil returned to India in 1920. Her early discoveries about class, culture and Indian women were fleshed out in 1934 when she returned from Paris.

It is unfortunate that Sher-Gil died when she was just 28, quite suddenly and mysteriously in Lahore in 1941. As a result, her work both as a painter and individual can never be seen as entirely complete. One is constantly speculating where she would have reached had she stayed alive. However, there is still a considerable corpus of Sher-Gil's work that offers much to the historian and critic. While most have chosen to underplay the clear indications of her bisexuality through her writings and paintings, it is time one revisited Sher-Gil.

Sher-Gil's obvious delight in painting the female nude has been discussed by historians like Chawla and the late Mulk Raj Anand. It takes on newer shades of meaning with an acknowledgement of her 'bi-curiosity'. One may argue that Sher-Gil was just following the pre-existing male tradition by painting nudes. After all, the academic style which she studied at Paris had a long history of female nudes. And Sher-Gil openly acknowledged post-Impressionist painter Paul Gauguin's influence on her early work. Gauguin was known for his erotica, his often exotic depiction of the Tahitian women that he painted and had love affairs with. But her persistent interest in woman as a subject, even after she developed her own style which no longer bore such obvious references to Gauguin or the Impressionists, belies such arguments. Given that Sher-Gil actively questioned patriarchy in her diary writings and through her paintings, there is probably little doubt that her taste for the female nude was not just a blind mimicry of the 'male tradition'.

In many ways, Sher-Gil's bohemian lifestyle, which was quite unheard of even in her own social milieu, stood to question binary relationships between men and women. Besides her torrid relationship with a young painter, Boris Taslistzky, during her student years, Sher-Gil had many non-platonic friendships that dovetailed into her marriage with her cousin, Victor Egan. It has been said that she apparently entered into a marriage of convenience in order to escape dependence on her parents. It was, nonetheless, a marriage in the teeth of family opposition, in 1938 pre-War Europe. Egans' daughter Eva Sud (from his second marriage after Sher-Gil) has recollected that her father and Amrita had a very unique friendship. She had learned about some of it as a child, though it was adulthood that taught her that much of what they had shared was extremely unconventional. Her impression remained that it had been a tumultuous time for her father, even though he and his artist wife had shared an easy intimacy and camaraderie that came from growing up together. Implicit in many of her recollections is the innuendo that Sher-Gil questioned monogamy and never really quit her 'curiosity' about women.

Much of the writing on Sher-Gil has not sufficiently acknowledged that she, besides being India's first woman painter, was also the first to touch upon the erotic space that women share. Hers was the first voice that reclaimed and celebrated the space of desire for and by a woman. Looking at *Young Girls* (1932), an early painting done in an academic style, one can see the traces of her later bolder voice, besides being a fine study of two women—her sister Indira and their friend Denise Proteaux, a journalist—which won her the gold medal at the Grand Salon in Paris when she was barely 20. The work has been cited as important by many a critic and it is a good place to begin decoding her hidden stories. Historians like Mulk Raj Anand and Geeta Kapur agree that it foregrounds her prevailing concern with the duality of cultural influences in her life. Indira, dressed in trendy European apparel, sits opposite Denise who seems to belong to an era gone by, in her flowing gown.

The Sher-Gils no doubt led a bourgeoisie lifestyle and the painting's rich colours, soft textures and grandiose scale clearly reflect these factors. Besides the obvious reference to the times she lived in, the work is heavy with an unspoken, yet tangible erotic energy.

On the surface of it, Indira and Denise face each other in a room at the Rue de Bassane (Paris) engaged in what appears to be light conversation. However, removed from its immediate setting, the painting conveys a deeper, more complex mood. Denise's gold tresses shimmer and fall as a coy veil over her gaze, averted from both the viewer and the woman

YOUNG GIRLS

gazing at her. Predictable in what it is trying to convey, the coy erotic charge of the sitter is unmistakable.

Opposite her, the short-haired Asian woman (Indira) sensuously dips her hand into a bowl of cherries, regarding the other woman with slightly lowered lids. Amrita has placed other elements in the painting to orchestrate that air of alluring seduction. Indira's black stockings, Denise's voluminous soft dress and the glowing red cherries—a fruit noted for its erotic quality and the symbolic connotations of the loss of virginity—all play a vital role in the composition. Interestingly, Indira's gaze resembles what was soon to be known as Sher-Gil's trade mark 'inner eye'. Many of her sitters appear caught up in a reverie of their own—one in which the gaze of the viewer is not all-important. Which is why one argues that Sher-Gil's paintings were quite different from what her male counterparts, like Raja Ravi Varma, were trying to convey. Although her women are coy and sexualized, they are also reflective and self-possessed. *Two Girls* (1939), a much later work done in Budapest, bears the maturity of the shift that occurred in her style when she studied the miniatures and the Ajanta murals. More importantly, though, this work presents a more stark and confrontational image as opposed to her subtle approach in *Young Girls*.

Set within the intimacy of a bedroom, Sher-Gil has her two young women play out a dormant narrative. Characteristic of her trope-like arrangements, the two face an invisible viewer who seems to have chanced upon them. However, their formal stance and frontal approach make it evident this is not a keyhole glimpse of a secret act. The standing woman is clearly European, with brown hair, bluish eyes and fair skin. Her tightly drawn back hair, lithe body and boyish breasts all add to her proud, confident stance. The seated woman is the coy one this time. A dark Asian, she is draped with a stark white bedsheet that covers—only partly—her full-bodied sensuality. Sher-Gil might be playing out the old

cliché of active/passive roles attributed to same-sex relationships but the work clearly resonates with a heavy sexual air, one in which the two women share more than a sisterly bond.

Given that the work was done after the considerable gap of five years after her letter to her mother, one cannot rule out the possibility that this work is an acknowledgement of those desires she expressed in it. To what level is the work autobiographical? These are important questions that need to be raised and can no longer be ignored. Art historian Eve Millar has analysed *Two Girls* as a picture loaded with overtones of both a personal and a social nature that touches upon the quick of Amrita's consciousness. Millar has no doubt that it is a painting of the physical and emotional longing of two women for one another. Yet it is also, she believes, a rejection and a misunderstanding—the rejection of an impossible desire, not by either individual but by the invisible forces within themselves which neither understands.

Interestingly, of four of Sher-Gil's most important paintings done by early 1940—*The Ancient Story Teller* (1941), *The Swing* (1940), *The Bride's Toilette* (1937) and *Woman Resting on Charpoy* (1940)—three have women as their main protagonists. While *The Bride's Toilette* is replete with all the intimacy that women share in their private spaces of the *shringar*—a prevalent theme for many of the Rajasthani and Mughal miniatures—Sher-Gil has infused it with her usual air of melancholy. Here, the *sakhis* dressing the fairskinned bride carry none of the happy

THE BRIDE'S TOILETTE

air of a *bidai*. Instead, there is pain at parting. Mulk Raj Anand has inferred that the sense of doom that appears to engulf them is engendered by a foreboding of the loss of girlhood's freedom. In *Charpoy*, there is a quite perceptive understanding of the psychology of the feudal Indian woman. Beneath the apparently restful pose, there is a turmoil of suppressed desire. We are made to feel a shocking intimacy with the woman by her erotically suggestive pose and by the titled charpoy which places the viewer immediately above her. Though she seems to lie passively, there is a restless movement in the woman which suggests the painful birth of awareness—of the restraints imposed upon her by her social environment.

Sher-Gil's nephew, the artist Vivan Sundaram—the son of her sister, Indira—has recently approached, albeit obliquely, the subject her relationships with the self, the other and the othered. One of India's eminent artists, Sundaram readdresses what has often been passed off as sisterly bonding or same-sex friendship in Sher-Gil's paintings. In a series of digitally manipulated, black-and-white photo-montages titled 'Retake of Amrita' (2001), Sundaram involves the entire family in a dramatic, almost film-like image play. New dialogues are created between the Sher-Gil sisters. Her mother and father are also brought into the picture. Sher-Gil's models (she often got her hired help to pose for her paintings) and her paintings all figure in Sundaram's clever juxtapositions. We see Sher-Gil, reflected in a mirror, wearing both European and Indian apparel, her multicultural identity doubly accented. A family 'portrait' has Sundaram's mother, a young Indira, sitting in the foreground caressing a cat. Umrao Singh is at his desk amid papers and files, holding a magnifying glass. Amrita stands behind him, dressed in an unconventionally wrapped sari while Marie Antoinette is reflected in a mirror as she sits at the piano.

In another work, Amrita is dressed in a white satin dress. She poses for Umrao Singh, himself a photo enthusiast and the provider of much rich documentation of the family. Alongside, Sundaram has superimposed the image one of Sher-Gil's paintings of a luscious nude woman. The two figures interlace in an unconscious yet erotic embrace. Sundaram's intention of placing these two images together could not have been more transparent. Yet there is always room for play. After all, Sher-Gil herself would have found a single reading far too simplistic.

BHUPEN KHAKHAR

Possessed by a courage and daring that led him to search the cavernous pockets of his soul to speak out loud, Bhupen Khakhar was India's first queer artist to gain international acclaim. Not only did he throw open areas of private sexuality to a public viewer/voyeur, he foregrounded issues

of class culture and folklore with a critical edge that comes from being the voice of the 'othered'. In fact, many art historians, like Siva Kumar for example, felt that it was his exclusion from 'normality' that taught him to be aggressively truthful, sometimes so candid as to be indiscreet.

This candid indiscretion that Kumar refers to is the later 1980s work which was openly provocative, unlike his 1970s' work where innuendo and code were the tools through which he communicated his 'deviance'. However, Khakhar was not just ruffling feathers within the parameters of an elitist high art clique. As many art critics who appraised Khakhar's work have repeatedly noted, 'coming out' of the homosexual closet required considerable courage the world over, and certainly in India. Yet in the 1980s, homosexuality became one of the main themes of his work.

Scholars like Parul Dave and fellow painter Gulammohammed Sheikh often argue that Khakhar's art was enchanting in and of itself, so much so that it did not require the crutch or tokenism of being looked at within the parameters of a minority issue. His open, non-pretentious, figurative style and status as an untrained artist clearly worked in his favour. Historians have said that it was significant that Khakhar's disclosure of his sexual identity was made after his reputation as an artist was already ascendant, particularly in the international art scene. But, in any case, to speak of Khakhar without addressing the polemics of his homoerotic work and the energy and debate generated by it would be akin to eating a mango sans its seed. Looking back, a short time after Khakhar's death, one discovers that there is an increasing amount of posthumous fame that surrounds the artist. A tribute exhibition is held at Tao Art Gallery in Bombay, a large triptych gets top billing at a Christie's auction and several discussions surrounding his work are tabled at film festival venues and art caucuses.

Considering that Khakhar was largely marginalized and sidelined in his own country when he began to produce openly homoerotic work, one may question this transformation in critical attitudes. Is it the old cliché playing itself out: he's gay and he's dead, so it's finally safe to say he was a great person and an even better painter? The operative word, of course, is 'was'. Some may reason that posthumous acceptance is better than none at all, but looking at the way Khakhar lived his life—thumbing his nose at the very same society that he so cherished and lionized in many of his early works—it would probably be cold comfort for a man so bold. 'In the Indian art context there is no other way but to call Khakhar a vanguard figure thumbing his nose at high art—its modernist aesthetic and its progressive ideology,' wrote critic-curator Geeta Kapur, in her catalogue essay on the artist for a show that was held in Madrid at

the Reina Sofia in 2002. Khakhar achieved this through 'mockery and masquerade, literally. In the early 1970s he posed for photographs in absurd roles, wrote mischievous texts in his catalogue, donned fancy dress and held fake salon parties at his exhibitions,' confirms Kapur.

While Khakhar's forays into other media like photography, sculpture and glass painting, along with his play writing, were important parts of his oeuvre, it is his large format works and his delightful watercolours that have commanded the most critical acclaim, since it was those that bore the mark of stylistic grandeur, drawing on European masters and Russian icon painters. But they dealt with homosexuality quite openly.

To underscore why Khakhar's coming out via his art is a major triumph, one would have to reiterate that Khakhar identified wholly with the conservative background that he chose to rebel against. Born and raised in Bombay, he was a full-fledged chartered accountant with a nine-to-five job. But his student days were fuelled by meetings at the Bombay University where Khakhar rubbed shoulders with a group of radical, like-minded artists, many of whom moved to Baroda. He could no longer ignore his creative urge, and moved to Baroda in the 1960s. There, he got in touch with Gulammohammed Sheikh and soon joined the Faculty of Fine Arts at MS University where he studied art history. Painting was something that happened spontaneously.

It has been said that in spirit and ideology, Bhupen Khakhar's art is broadly in agreement with the rebellions of the movements in the 1960s and 1970s against what were construed as the asphyxiating norms of the prevailing genres of modernism and traditionalism. Influenced by the narrative style of painting that the Baroda artists largely followed, Khakhar, however, evolved his own language, using the popular images of barber-shop calendars, film posters and print ads to make his early collage works. He infused his paintings with a personal idiom, capturing the indolent pace of small-town Gujarat. How he carefully rendered its particular bourgeois characteristics has been noted by many of his critics.

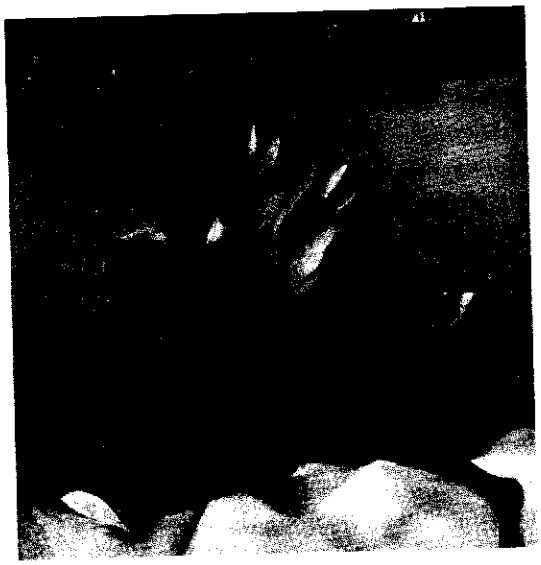
Unlike most trained artists, Khakhar never displayed any sense of an 'aesthetic embarrassment' that often becomes part of the baggage of an artist trained in, and aware of, European realism or academic painting. Though most artists belong to the great Indian middle class economically, they get subsumed into the cliques of the urban cultural elite once they enter the realm of High Art. The tastes of people back home become a vast range of kitsch, therefore they suffer from an aesthetic embarrassment. Khakhar, on the other hand, never abandoned his middle-class origins. In fact, he became a conduit of sorts, bringing those issues into the rarefied

realms of High Art—the 'everydayness' of his image of a middle-class Gujarati man, struggling to break free from the norms of a conservative society. A watchmaker (*Janta Watch Repairing*, 1972), a tailor (*Tailor Shop*, 1988) and a street musician (*Royal Circus*, 1974) are Khakhar's protagonists, caught in the soothing monotony of everyday existence.

But while his art was anchored in it, the soft-spoken Khakhar was so ironic and humorous about his own existence that he would often mockingly joke of the same social milieu that he lionized in some of his earlier works like *Factory Strike* (1972) and *Janta Watch Repairing*. Buried in the portrayal of this seemingly mundane life are some juicy titbits of erotica. If one looks closely at the *Tailor Shop*, the sexual innuendo sizzles loudly under the apparently innocent veneer of a gent getting himself measured for a pair of trousers. The key character has not only the master tailor suggestively running a measuring tape up his inner leg but a younger man seems to be assisting him by cupping the protagonist's genitalia in a covert, yet decidedly sexual, gesture.

In the late 1970s, Khakhar travelled to the Soviet Union, Italy and Britain. Hence, by the 1980s, when Khakhar embarks upon the more explicit works that foreground his homosexuality, his narrative has been enriched by several visual inspirations and artistic influences from medieval illuminated manuscripts, to Dutch painters like Bruegel and Kitaj. What we are confronted with, then, is not just a simple erotic painting but layers of narration, references to history, the Jatakas and much of Hindu mythology. Take, for example, Khakhar's most celebrated painting *You Can't Please All* (1981) takes off from the simple folk tale of two men trying to sell a donkey. Lacing it with allegory, Khakhar paints a man in the foreground standing naked on his balcony, watching the narrative unfold. The naked man has been interpreted as Khakhar himself, balanced on the great

YOU CAN'T PLEASE ALL



YAYATI

threshold of coming out, his nudity emblematic of the public revelation of his sexuality. The fable itself unfolds against the backdrop of a hypothetical provincial town: a son and his father try to follow the advice of every passer-by and in the end, lose the donkey that they were trying to sell. The moral? Live by one's own judgement and, yes, you can't please all.

Importantly, this narrative unfolds in the location of the public domain. It is tempting to read autobiographical narrative into Khakhar's paintings of this period, since much of it was indeed a reflection of the self. However, the other is equally important in his work, since a larger queer male consciousness is created within Khakhar's world: that of the public bath house, the open tea-stall romance and the erotic undertones of guru-shishya *yaarana*. *Yayati* (1987), a later work, features a well-known scene from the Mahabharata in which the king, old and impotent, asks his son to give him his youth. Set against a bright pink background (Khakhar's love for colour reflects the blues, pinks and greens of middle-class taste), the two figures are an old man and an angel-winged youth.

Pannikar and Juncosa have interpreted this work as Khakhar's dispassionate statement on queer relationships. The winged youth is read as the active partner, a younger male who is potent and the giver of life to the frail, shy and more passive older man who lies prostrate on a bed of soft clouds. Friend and fellow artist Nalani Malani believes that Khakhar was expressing existential angst for his older partners. Kapur underscores the work as a bold, queer reinterpretation of mythology. In each reading, though, it is clear that the content is homoerotic and no evaluation has tried to downplay its sexual content.

Within the public sphere though, works like the overtly sexual *Two Men in Banaras* (1982), *Yayati* and a lot of the 1980s' work that was seen as avant-garde and cutting edge, have been censored. Geeta Kapur tells of how, at an exhibition in the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA),

TWO MEN IN BANARAS

New Delhi, the paintings were switched around after Khakhar left when the opening of the show was over. Khakhar's only retrospective in India, a dream project, at the NGMA, underwent its fair share of censorship too. While the show was very well presented and encompassed works from the 1970s to the later 2000 sketchbooks, it was difficult to exhibit the more overt works which addressed Khakhar's sexuality. Apparently it was the only way to ensure that the retrospective could be held in India, being open to all viewers including children, its organizers have explained.

His position as India's first gay painter is seen as historically path-breaking. So it was rather unfortunate that such seminal works like *You Can't Please All* and *Two Men in Banaras*, just could not feature in a show as important as this one. The menacing shadow of the self-appointed moral brigade holds sway, where nothing is thought of sabotaging an art exhibition or burning a theatre. However, there are private collectors who have not flinched at showing Khakhar's more explicit work. Walk into a plush office in Bombay's Nariman Point and a naked old man stares out of a canvas at prim executives in their three-piece suits—with a paunch, slightly sagging flesh and silver white hair, he carves his own niche, a profane god who sits unapologetic yet tender, a feature that Khakhar's work has been praised for. He vehemently refused to idealize his protagonists, even when he painted them larger than life, full-frontal and iconic. The awkward appearance of his figures, their fleshy bodies seeming to lack a skeletal structure or defy the laws of perspective, are much-discussed features of his work.

Toward the latter half of his life, Khakhar began to paint violent, confrontational works, reverting to some of his earlier portraiture like the famous painting of Salman Rushdie. Only, these portraits were gory. A

pock-marked Babubhai with little pustules on his face stares at the viewer. Another character sticks out his tongue to reveal the blisters on it. In some instances there are young men, parodies of Bollywood heroes, with revolvers held to their own heads, bleeding and wounded as they pose for the gaze of an unknown audience. In an interview for *The Indian Express* Khakhar once told me, 'These images came to me while I was at the hospital while undergoing treatment for cancer.' The pain of his own life and the disease that had gripped his frail body translated into images of blood and gore. But Khakhar still had the last laugh. 'When I painted the Bollywood heroes, I was looking critically at how bleeding is always seen as something manly. Heroes are supposed to shed buckets of blood and yet not flinch. It is seen as very macho.' Somewhere, Khakhar was making a larger statement, of how there are no screen icons for queer men to identify with. It's not much of a choice: the hyper-hetero male or the limp-wristed drag queen. A parody at best that is not a very affirming picture. That is the reason why Khakhar's critique forms an important part of theory that relooks at popular genres of cinema.

There is little doubt that Bhupen Khakhar's life and work are exemplary—the multicultural, multiethnic and gender plural content of his work that crosses several barriers, from the vantage point of an artist as well as, in a sense, an activist.

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