Simulated Lovers and Hyperreal Longing: Baudrillardian Hyperreality and Queer Desire in *Cobalt Blue* in the Age of Social Media

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Abstract

Cobalt Blue by Sachin Kundalkar is a delicate, but effective, study of queer desire, secrecy and identity construction and thus, is a fitting reading to apply Baudrillardian reading of hyperreality. The nameless paying-guest is not a fully familiar subject but a simulacrum, a picture created out of fantasy, projection and desire. Both Tanay and Anuja create hyperreal versions of the lover, and endow him with meanings that transcend his material existence. Based on the idea of simulacra developed by Jean Baudrillard, this paper suggests that the desire in Cobalt Blue is working in a dimension whereby the representation takes the place of reality and that emotional truth is drawn out of the images and not the lived intimacy.The paper also places the novel into the background of modern social media where LGBTQIA+ identities are being reproduced and disseminates via mediated visuals, aesthetic behaviours, and symbolic identifiers. Social media creates hyperreal queer identities which seem logical, desirable and real but still dislocated to the everyday vulnerability and lived complexity. As Tanay is more in love with the imagination, rather than the mutual presence, so too are digital queer identities, which are emotionally compelling but physically distanced. The paper is an indication that Cobalt Blue offers a literary framework in regard to how the mediation of queer longing, visibility, and selfhood is mediated by simulation. Finally, the paper shows how the Baudrillard theory can be used to explain why the landscape of queer representation is so changing in that the desire is not organized by the real but by its constantly reproducing images.

Keywords: hyperreality, simulacra, queer desire, social media representation, cobalt blue

Introduction

The *Cobalt Blue* by Sachin Kundalkar plays a very important role in the evolution of Indian queer literature. The novel was first written in Marathi in 2006, at a time when in India queer identities were expressed less via open pronouncement, and majorly expressed indirectly, silently, and through displacement. The socio-legal atmosphere before partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in 2009 and eventual repeal of the law in 2018 under Section

377 required the use of narrative modes that coded queer desire, but did not name it. *Cobalt blue* mimics this historical limitation by focusing on interiority, implication and absence. An English translation by Jerry Pinto subsequently widened the scope of the novel to span all regional and linguistic borders and place it into international queer literary discourse without losing its cultural particularism.

The novel depicts the concurrent wish of two siblings Tanay and Anuja to the same unnamed paying guest staying in their family house. More importantly, the guest is also illusive and undeveloped, denying the psychological depth or narrative resolution. Instead of being a realist character, he works as a symbolic figure around whom desire runs. This absence is not a narrative lack but a structural principle. Desire in *Cobalt Blue* occurs in the imagination, projection and longing which makes less of the beloved than a creation of an image built by desire. A narrative economy of this nature is open to a theoretical approach that transcends realism in favour of an encounter with simulation and representation.

The theory of hyperreality by Jean Baudrillard as explained in Simulacra and Simulation is a useful interpretation of the novel by Kundalkar. Baudrillard states, "The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth—it is the truth which conceals that there is none" (Baudrillard, 1). This description fundamentally uproots old conceptions of authenticity, origin and representation. Baudrillard does not consider images as secondary reflexions of a prior reality, but instead, contemporary culture functions by simulation, where signs do not refer any longer to an original referent. As he states, "It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real itself" (Baudrillard, 2). In a hyperreal state, representations are not deceptive to the reality, rather, they substitute it, creating meanings that circulate without reference to lived experience.Baudrillard further states that "the real is produced from miniaturized units, from matrices, memory banks and command models" (Baudrillard, 2) implying that reality itself, is a product created by

systems of signs. Meaning thus becomes not produced out of embodied experience or historical continuity but out of repetition, circulation and aesthetic coherence. In this conceptual framework, desire is growing less and less attached to corporeal presence and becomes attached to images, projections as well as simulations- an observation that becomes very central in comprehending the mediated and imagined nature of queer longing adhered to in *Cobalt Blue*. This paper argues that *Cobalt Blue* presents a literary hyperreality where queer desire is aimed at a simulacrum and not a subject that can be known. Placing the novel in conversation with the current researchers of queer identity and social media, the paper shows how Kundalkar's novel predicts digital forms of queer self-fashioning.

Discussion

Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and hyperreality presents a strong outlook on the desire form that develops when the conditions of articulating and socially recognising desires are limited. In Simulacra and Simulation, Baudrillard suggests that our modern culture ceases to rely on the principles of representation as the reflection of an original reality. Instead, we form meaning by simulation, where "Simulation threatens the difference between the 'true' and the 'false,' the 'real' and the 'imaginary'" (Baudrillard, 3). This definition makes the perception of emotion or even social experience unstable, by that it needs to have a stable origin. In this state of hyperreal life, affective life is self-sufficient, not dependent on reciprocity or fulfilment. The theoretical orientation allows reading *Cobalt Blue* as developing queer desire as inward, imagined as well as mediated, without realist models of character development, disclosure and closure.

The nameless visitor of *Cobalt Blue* is the illustration of the logic of the simulacrum. Lacking a sense of psychological depth and narrative voice, he is not a subject of knowledge, but a blank onto which desire is projected. This lack is not part of the narrative restriction but a stylistic principle. Baudrillard explains that simulation is "The real has

become our true utopia—but a utopia which is no longer in the realm of the possible, because it is already realized" (Baudrillard, 123). The paying guest replaces intimacy, freedom, and self-recognition without even becoming an interlocutor. He is not loved because of his presence but because of what he represents in the emotional lives of Tanay and Anuja.

This hyperreal structure of longing is most vividly stated by Tanay narration. His need develops in the form of intimacy without dialogue, closeness without reciprocity. Tanay does not confess or act on his feelings but maintains them, keeping them within himself, letting imagination and memory take the place of interaction. The silence which the novel predicts does not mean absence of emotions but the state of survival. Within the socio-legal parameters of pre-decriminalisation India, the risk of openly calling queer desire cannot be undertaken. The realisation of the collapse of the real and the imaginary by Baudrillard is therefore experienced in terms of subjectivity, the emotional reality that Tanay goes through exists regardless of disclosure and validation.

Observation turns out to be the main form of intimacy of Tanay. He tells us, "Finally, I decided that there was nothing to be gained by putting a name to what I was feeling. Instead, I'd just get to know him better in my own way" (Kundalkar, 76). The stare replaces conversation, generating emotional intimacy with no mutual response. Here it is especially applicable to the argument of Baudrillard that "Information devours its own content; it devours communication and the social" (Baudrillard, 80). Tanay compiles desire out of bits, gestures, reciprocal domestic practises, brief intimacy, not out of long-term engagement. These fragments are stored, reproduced, reactivated creating an emotional coherence that does not need any reaction on the part of the beloved.

The most important thing is that the paying guest is kept silent in the story. His interior monologue is non-existent, guarding the simulation against contradiction. Tanay speaks back to him retrospectively, "I've had many people come and go

in my life. I didn't see myself as having been cheated by anyone. This time everything was different. This time changed every tomorrow" (Kundalkar, 56). This paradox describes exactly the hyperreal state of being there and not being able to gain access, being close but not relating. According to Baudrillard, image in simulation points to nothing but substitutes the real. The emotional presence of the paying guest is more than his physical presence, serving as a mark that orders desire and is not accessible as a subject.

The paying guest leaves but does not destroy this structure; instead, it makes it even greater. Tanay remembers, "When you left, something in me collapsed, quietly" (Kundalkar, 57). The focus on silence is considerable. The loss is internalised instead of being dramatized, and this is another element that strengthens the interior effect of the novel. In hyperreal systems Baudrillard notes that signs have a tendency to have much longer lives than do material things. The paying guest was never completely accessible and therefore his absence does not deny desire. Rather, it holds on to longing in the form of memory, projection and repetition. The state of desire is abated in time, guarded against disillusionment.

The parallel narrative told by Anuja adds to the meditation on projection and idealization of the novel, showing the unequal impact of desire in gendered and sexual statuses. Anuja, similar to Tanay, is eager to receive the paying guest by the power of imagination instead of intimacy. Her desire, however, is capable of being assimilated into culturally intelligible discourses about heterosexual failure, but the desire of Tanay is structurally unsettled. This imbalance shows how hyperreality is a more persistent state of queer subjects, whose desires have no socially approved avenues of expression. Baudrillard states that, "illusion is no longer possible, because the real itself is no longer possible" is echoed here as Tanay sees it, the imaginary intimacy is not an alternative to the real but the only form of emotional possibilities it offers.

The key to maintaining this hyperreal economy of affect is repetition. Tanay finds a way back to memory, repeating scenes that deepen but do not

solve the desire. According to Baudrillard, meaning in hyperreality does not arise out of difference or progress but rather out of circulation and repetition. Here, memory is used as a place of simulation that perfects longing and never allows closure. The desire becomes self-referential, bringing self-strength through its continuation as opposed to fulfilment.

Cobalt Blue looks remarkably prescient when put in conversation with the modern literature on queer identity and social media. Studies of LGBTQ+ digital self-presentation emphasize that identity is negotiated through mediated visibility rather than direct social affirmation. Coker et al. observe that LGBTQ+ users engage in strategic self-presentation, balancing authenticity, safety, and audience awareness, "Most of our participants (60%) described feeling more authentic in online spaces than in online interactions" (Coker et al., 73). This negotiation reflects the emotional management of Tanay whereby the desire is maintained by keeping it indirectly hidden and not directly revealed. This construction of desire inwardly by Tanay functions in a similar way that the construction of desire in the two settings described. His inner world turns into an inner place of self-identification, which replaces the lack of social confirmation. It is important here that according to Baudrillard, simulation produces "effects of the real" without being present, furthermore that Tanay is longing because the longing is emotionally consistent, not because it is returned.

Concurrently, the novel reveals the shortcomings of these structures. Whereas simulation permits desire to survive, it precludes change. The desire of Tanay is intense and static, full of affection but lacking of relational opportunity Baudrillard's warning that "There is no longer a respective position-the real disappearing to make room for an image, more real than the real, and conversely-the remainder disappearing from the assigned location to resurface inside out, in what it was the remainder of, etc" (Baudrillard, 144) finds a literary manifestation here. The greater the continuity of desire through imagination is the less real lived reciprocity is available. *Cobalt Blue* therefore does not introduce hyperreality as illusion but as a historically determined form of queer survival, one that does not eliminate desire but rather holds it in a suspension.

Conclusion

Reading *Cobalt Blue* within Jean Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality depicts the novel as a foresighted investigation of queer desire that is influenced by simulation, absence and projection. The anonymous paying guest is not a realistic character but a simulacrum whose image is created by desire instead of deed. The force of desire in the novel is perpetuated by the power of imagination and not reciprocity, anticipation and not fulfilment. Laying *Cobalt Blue* in conversation with other contemporary discourses of queer identity and social media, this paper shows how novel predicts digital versions of queer self-fashioning. Social-media platforms further this logic of hyperreality to an extreme whereby identities can be experienced as authentic despite having been created through selective representational and aesthetic performance. The emotional truth cannot be attached to material conditions as Baudrillard suggests when representations substitute the reality. *Cobalt Blue* depicts that hyperreality is not confined to digital culture but can be observed everywhere where the desire is mediated via absence and representation. The novel provides a literary paradigm to interpret modern queer experience in the world that is more and more dominated by simulation. The queer longing is seen as on the one hand, with a sense of the profound reality, and on the other, with the sense of the hyperreal, which is perpetuated by the continuing images that prevail even after the real has vanished.

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