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LITERARY SKETCH AS A GENRE IN QUESTION: A PROBE INTO KALIPRASANNA
SINHA'S "SKETCHES BY HOOTUM THE OWL"

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ABSTRACT

Sketches by Hootum the Owl: A Satirist's View of Colonial Calcutta as a cultural artefact deftly delineates the codes and customs of the society at a crucial juncture. The everyday life within the burgeoning colonial city-space is minutely portrayed with a unflinching satire. The liberal humanist agenda of Hootum inevitably transmutes it into a Eurocentric cultural text within the colonial context. As a literary sketch Hootum subverts the notions of a fixed discipline and anticipates the traits of literary anthropology. The self-reflexive prose narrative which is replete with factual details is in fact an ethnological study carried out by the author himself. The anthropological study has been an important part of the discursive strategy that the author adopts in the text which is largely based on self-mockery. Literary sketch has always been symptomatic of counterfactual contestations which problematize the text to a certain extent. The negotiation between factual documentations and inherent counter-arguments accounts for an interesting reading altogether. The era which the sketch intends to represent is tinged with cross-currents at the ideological level when the liberal ideals are linked with traditional conservative thoughts. Most importantly the sketch as a genre turns out to be quite discreet as it valorizes the multiple renditions across disciplines that the text elicits and Hootum in this regard as a literary sketch by all means is a specific case in point.

Keywords: Literary Sketch, genre, anthropology, discipline, discursive strategy.

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Kaliprasanna Sinha who was born in a wealthy family in 1840 has been widely remembered for *Sketches by Hootum the Owl*, in which he minutely portrays the early Calcutta cityscape along with the newly emergent class of Bengali people. The literary sketch valorizes inter-personal relation in a cultural context and assembles commentaries which are invectives in nature. He himself belongs to that upwardly mobile social class which has been severely denounced in his sketch. In this interesting account of the contemporary culture the writer of the text resorts to a pseudo-name and carries on an endless onslaught to divulge the flawed

mores of the polished and opportunist people around him. Kaliprasanna in this way reminds the readers of *Sketches by Boz, Illustrative of Everyday Life and Everyday People* by Dickens who depicts the nuanced tale of London and the people associated with the city. The author of the sketch intends to assume the role of a satirist with a moral obligation to set everything right in a reformist zeal. This is why he has named the narrator of this sketch after a bird that has got the ability to see through things at the darkest hours and hoot or scoff at the same time. Living in close quarters the owl in his sketch explicitly unveils the evil intentions of the crime-prone section of the society. Hootum curves a niche of its own among the others for its scathing attack that it maintains throughout. Kaliprasanna in the preface to his witty sketch Hootum declares that few among his readers may find themselves to be portrayed in the narrative. But he also at the same time defends himself by acknowledging that he has never desired to choose a particular person to make him the object of his satire or the butt of ridicule and confesses that he also includes himself in his censure towards the society in general. The fact that he cannot escape his own flailing elevates him to the position of a faithful observant of his social milieu. In the second edition of the sketch Hootum announces in the preface that he has achieved success in pursuing few people of their follies and foibles and vows in particular that the sketch has been the 'Household words' in reality. In his sketch Kaliprasanna engages himself in an ethnographic survey that incorporates the meticulous documentation of major historical events like Sepoy Mutiny and Indigo Revolution along with several references to festivals, rituals and religious ceremonies. The text also mentions the Young Bengal and Brahma Samaj Movement which are the familiar names of that time. Thus Hootum never fails in his task to keep himself busy in surveying his surroundings as an observer committed to the duty that he himself assigns to. The sketch of Hootum begins with the depiction of Charak festival that is mainly observed in the month of March and April in Bengal when socially downtrodden devotees of Lord Shiva perform the rituals of penance. The occasion effectively makes possible a social subversion as the people who are relegated to the margin throng and hold the centre stage. There are also references to festivals like Snanajatra of Mahesh, Rathayatra, Durga Puja and Ramleela. Hootum falls back on these occasions to take digs at the polished Babus well versed in English and cultured to the core as they are seen to visit the shady quarters of the city and also the young people actively involve themselves to frequent liquor shops. He rues the change in dress codes, food habits and holds that refined class responsible for it. This reformist but self-defeating approach of satire also points to the colonial encounter that remains at the root of the change in every respect. The pro-Hindu sentiment is severely condemned in the text and thus it vouches for being secular in approach. The way Kaliprasanna Sinha comes down heavily on his contemporary society unfolds the fact he is deeply dissatisfied with the decay all around. He mourns the loss of ethical values and looks for a social change via the medium of religious reformation. But at the same time he cannot detach himself from taking pride in his high birth. He loses faith in the Western educated Bengali intelligentsia that fails to ensure any radical change in society. This is where the text also becomes ambivalent as the readers cannot miss inherent cynicism that lies beneath the humorous sketch.

Sketches by Hootum as a cultural artefact deftly delineates the codes and customs of a particular society at a specific period of time and in this way the historical details in the text turns out to be anthropological in essence. Anthropological study has shifted away from the objectification of social life, as Bernard Cohn in his essay *An Anthropologist among the Historians'* observes, to the study of how lived experience constitutes the culture. Historical documentation which is always an engaged subjective process engages itself precisely with the cultural codification of social norms and values. It differs from the anthropologist who mainly figures out how social relationship is feasible within a referential frame. Hootum as a nineteenth century cultural text maintains both these approaches as it closely observes English educated native people, resurgent Bengali intelligentsia and the conservative Brahmin who are reluctant to shed their age-old ethics. The anthropologist studies history in retrospect to get hold of the embedded structure. Kaliprasanna belongs to the aristocratic strata but his Hootum does not resist itself from noticing how the society is fissured along the lines of class and caste. The anthropological study also introspects into the colonial encounter if any to find the traces within the textual space. Hootum manages to drag out how the rumour that the Bengali people are converted to Christianity by coercion has become a useful ploy to incite anger among

the common Bengali people during the Sepoy Mutiny. Thus this literary sketch subverts the notion of any fixed discipline and anticipates the inherently anti-disciplinary stance of a modernist text. The self-reflexive prose narrative which is replete with factual details and fictional characters valorizes the interdisciplinary notion that is necessary for the ethnological search carried out by the author himself. The anthropological study has been an important part of the discursive strategy that the author adopts in the text which is largely based on self-mockery. Hootum is different from other literary sketches of contemporary time as it does not only intent to lampoon the Babu class but represents almost every section of the society with graceful expertise. Chitrlekha Basu in the introduction to her edited version of *Sketches by Hootum* harps on this in this way: "In Hootum's *Sketches* it's the professionals and the marginal people who are most interesting to watch. The wily gatekeeper who would not let a visitor pass unless he has been paid his cut: the procurer who has the uncanny ability to sniff a good deal and con his client, the sycophant who has turned his occupation into a fine art and a bona fide profession parade across the pages of *Sketches*". (Basu xlvi) Hootum can easily be regarded as an ethnographical study that searches for the nexus between people and culture by drawing attention to the society at large. Chitrlekha deftly points out how Hootum carries on his insightful search and does not spare "the half-hearted Brahmo, who has not been able to shed his ritual-favouring orthodox Hindu core" (Basu xlv) and exposed "the Brahmin priests, especially the ones looking for a free meal or a grant to run their non-existent schools" (Basu xlvi). Hootum is not prejudiced against the 'low-bred' people as such but being an upper-caste educated aristocrat, as Chitrlekha has argued, bears the responsibility of purging the ills of the society on his own. Hootum is also unparallel in the way it breaks free from the rigid linguistic pattern. Chitrlekha in this regard writes, "...street language is best suited to the tone and tenor of the sketch format. ... The dignified and luxurious prose, picked up from his exhaustive reading of the European and Sanskrit classics of literature was discarded. The intoxicating mix of street lingo, Calcutta cockney, risqué expletives, peppered with Sanskrit, Urdu and English made Hootum's language an anachronistic milestone in the time of Victorian sensibilities that no one has been able to emulate to the same effect". (Basu xliii) The liberal-humanist approach which remains embedded in the Enlightenment project relies heavily on the rational faculty. In the nineteenth century Bengal the cultural phenomenon of Renaissance is intrinsically associated with the European ideals that to a great extent influence the stalwarts associated with it. The radical social change that people like Kaliprasanna usually envisions does not happen in Bengal at all and it carries with it an impression of failure. This is reflected in the literary endeavour in which Hootum becomes cynic at times while keeping a close eye on the major events of the present time. The literary text is situated between the abhorred inclination towards the social climbers and acute despair emanated from the wastefulness prevalent everywhere. This is precisely why the accounts delineated by the author becomes historically more viable to the readers these days. The amount of jeering maintained in the text validates the historicity of the sketch which does not concede any essential reading of any sort. Literary sketches has always been symptomatic of counterfactual contestations which problematize the texts to a certain extent and the negotiation between factual documentations and inherent counter-arguments accounts for an interesting reading altogether. The era which the sketch intends to represent is tinged with cross currents at the ideological level when the liberal ideals are linked with traditional conservative thoughts. In the chapter named as 'The Tricksters' the readers are acquainted with the confrontation between the hegemony of Brahminical culture and Western liberal education: "At a time when the Hindu religion held tremendous sway, and people did not know about the healing property of a substance, or the existence of chemistry and geology, they would be easily taken in. But now it was not easy to pull off a hoax, thanks to widespread English education". Hootum makes pungent attack on the opportunist Brahmin when he portrays the character of the 'Sudden Incarnate' Babu Padmalochan Dutta and heavily criticises the Brahminical cult: "He never failed to observe the usual Doljatra, Durga Puja and the thirtenn other festivals held during the twelve months of the Bengali calendar. Even when it came to observing [something as mundane as Ghentu Puja, Padmalochan would organize an offering of sweets and hire an amateur theatre group to perform". Thus the literary sketch raises several pertinent questions regarding the cultural practice of Brahmin people who do not share the progressive ideals that he himself has attempted to advocate. Later on he explains the reason why Brahminism is inextricably linked with

self-aggrandizement: "With the predominance of English education, the coming of Rammohun Roy and the fact that religion was now seen in the light of truth, the Hindu religion had fallen on hard times. Padmalochan put his heart and soul together and pledged to remove this [malaise]. ... Being educated or encouraging people to be educated was not the part of the family tradition. For generations together, they had held on to the steadfast belief that knowing how to sign one's name was good enough to manage one's property and wealth. The family had no links whatsoever with Saraswati, the Goddess of Learning, or the practitioners of literature". In this way Hootum dictates on and charts out social legislation because he adopts the role of moral custodian who safeguards the ethical values by staunchly disavowing the malpractices around. He admits vehemently, "the nature of the sworn Hindus who live in style has been revealed in the sketch on the 'Sudden Incarnate'. It is this great ones who fiercely resist reformation. They are like a thorn that brings disaster in the way of Bengal's good fortune and are a pest in society". Kaliprasanna's Hootum stands out as a cultural anthropologist as he ponders on the chapter, 'In the Name of Ram': "The kind of activities, entertainment and business one finds in a culture at a particular time are an index of what the people of that culture might be capable of. It is the temperament of a particular culture that drives it like a locomotive, while its [collective] behaviour acts like a weathercock". Sketches by Hootum the Owl negotiates with the discursive practices and as a native informant connects with the modern readers. With the conscious and creative engagement with socio-cultural environment Hootum propounds an iconoclastic agenda against fundamentalism and bureaucracy. It also sanctions spatial representation of a unique transcendental subject that writes itself and in this process rewrites the surrounding environment by distancing itself as a moral exemplar with essential liberal ethics.

WORK CITED

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