

Ahmad Bilal*

Aysha Bilal**

Munnu Bhai; Aura and Beyond through Portraiture

Abstract

Photography's ability to make a phenomenon believable authenticates it as an act to record memory to archive pictorial heritage. Photography has a strong role in building collective visual narratives based on memories over the course of history. Due to trustworthiness in its character photography has been used in articulating individual and collective identities. This paper re-identifies par excellence writer, columnist, and poet Munnu Bhai, by a visit through a brief selection of his portraits captured over significant phases of his life. It investigates the sitter through semiotic analysis theories invented by leading critics in order to explore Munnu Bhai's journey, his passions, failures and successes keeping in view his socio-economic predispositions. Whilst interpreting first layer of 'representation' of a posed celebrity, Munnu Bhai, in front of the camera 'who thinks who he is' or 'he wants others to think who he is', and by sensing Barthes 'air' or seeing the unseen at the deeper layer. Hence, this paper rediscovers his 'aura and beyond' by re-describing the connotations apparently subdued in the photographic frame.

Introduction

"Perhaps the air is ultimately something moral, mysterious contributing to the face of reflection of a life value?" (Barthes 2010)

Barthes places photography beyond the limitations of the terms like 'art' and 'technique'. Photography is regarded superior of being able to represent the unseen, the unconscious, the absence and finally the 'air'. Roland Barthes' 'air'; the expression of truth, enables mediator (photographer) to tell permanent truth which other arts lack.

Air, the expression of truth, makes photography so believable that it has categorically been considered an act to record memory to archive a family's pictorial heritage. Significance of photography in a family life, like any other customs or the way of living, has made sociologists and anthropologists to acknowledge its role in interpreting and understanding individuals and communities. Susan Sontag (2005) describes photograph as a tool for recording the essence of relationships and family life: 'Through photographs, each family constructs a portrait chronicle of itself – a portable kit of images that bears witness to its connectedness'. Moreover, photography is playing a role in building collective visual narratives based on memories; thus, it has been articulating identities.

* Dr. Ahmad Bilal, Assistant Professor, College of Art and Design, University of the Punjab, Lahore.

** Ayesha Bilal, College of Art and Design, University of the Punjab, Lahore.

This photographic research paper reflects upon the portraits of Munnu Bhai (1933-2018) an acclaimed columnist, progressive playwright and revolutionary Punjabi poet, and attempts to understand journey of his life through nine of his iconic portraits among hundreds. Munnu Bhai is also a close relative of researcher, so most of these photographs are kind of family records, so these also are playing their role of constructing family; however, this paper only focuses on the literary or professional life of the writer and reveals specific phases of his life, through semiotic analysis.

At first layer photography holds significance as an ultimate mode of representation for its subject's visual appearance and seeable surroundings (Scruton 2008). At the next layers photography offers information which is beyond visual representation thus making the role of photography more significant in constructing complexities of subject's identity. Intense theoretical frameworks have been implied to deconstruct the densities involved in photographic process; thus, semiotic analysis is most suited for this photographic exploration.

In a detailed analysis of a childhood portrait of Franz Kafka, Figure 1, probably dated in 1889, Walter Benjamin writes

There is a childhood photograph of Kafka, a supremely touching portrayal of his "poor, brief childhood." It was probably made in one of those nineteenth-century studios whose draperies and palm trees, tapestries and easels, placed them somewhere between a torture chamber and a throne room. At the age of about six the boy is presented in a sort of greenhouse setting, wearing a tight, heavily lace-trimmed, almost embarrassing child's suit. Palm branches loom in the background. And as if to make these upholstered tropics still more sultry and sticky, the subject holds in his left hand an oversized, wide-brimmed hat of the type worn by Spaniards. Immensely sad eyes dominate the landscape arranged for them, and the auricle of a large ear seems to be listening for its sounds (Benjamin 2005).

One of Munnu Bhai's lifetime inspirations Franz Kafka (1883-1924), belonged to a middle class family in Prague, fifty years before Munnu Bhai's birth (1933) in small city of Wazir Abad in a lower middle class family. In the childhood portrait (Figure 2) of Munnu Bhai, he is probably 12, standing beside his much younger sister. This photograph is a clear depiction of the hard economic conditions of the family he belongs to. Unlike Kafka he is standing against an unfinished brick wall of probably his family house. He is wearing an un-ironed pair of rag-like knickers and shirt which is far inferior in comparison to Kafka's dress (representing Kafka's poor background in words of Benjamin).

Barthes describes the discomfort he encounters once being in front of the camera as an object. This distress reveals the multifaceted series of images or pictures denouncing a range from aspiration to memory. According to Barthes photographing one subject, is a closed theme of forces, where four of the 'image-repertoires' intersect: 'the one that I think I am' (the mental self-image); 'the one I want others to think I am' (the idealized self-image); 'the one the photographer thinks I am' (the photographed self-image); and 'the one the photographer makes use of when exhibiting his art' (the public self-image or imago)(Barthes 2010).

Second portrait discussed in this paper represents Barthes first repository 'the one that I think I am' (the mental self-image). This is the second portrait (Figure 3) of 20 year old Munir Ahmad Qureshi reminds me of a scene Time Gentlemen Please!(1952), shown in Figure. 4, in terms of the up to date dressing sense which has been a significant part of Munnu Bhai's personality all his life... His creaseless face with bright hopeful and un-pouted eyes! Undoubtedly A starter and A Dreamer! In early 1950's Pakistan youngsters of this age having certain socio-economic background mostly had a blend of shyness and excitement on their faces and gaze... unlike his age fellows in this portrait Munir Ahmad Qureshi has certain control over his facial expressions, however his eyes are insisting to interpret some other dimension of his personality, slight glaze in the wide open eyes carries a character of a rebellious, and a little confused or under-confident, son of an assistant station master.

In this portrait (Figure 5) of his wedding day in the year 1968 Munir Ahmad Qureshi we are looking at a transformed Munnu Bhai. He is surrounded by renowned people like Dr. Ayub Mirza, Shafqat Tanveer Mirza, Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi and Sharif Kunjahi. His company depicts a growing career of his choice. This thrive is quite prominent in his body language. We are not looking at an excited groom but a rising star who is fully aware of his capabilities and impact. This portrait is set on a backdrop of the outer brick wall of an old house which means the subjects are may be standing in a street or alley. This portrait is part of a series consisting of about a dozen portraits of 2X2 inch. Some are with bride and more are without the bride in accordance with the family's socio-cultural background. This portrait represents another dimension of photography which relates to the anthropological function of it. This photograph along with the whole series informs about Pakistani rural culture in somewhere in late 1960's through dresses, relation inclinations, gaze, expressions and much more.

Roland Barthes writes about his term *punctum* about photography '... it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me'. To him *punctum* leads a photograph to be loved rather to be only liked at the connotative level. This portrait (Figure 6) of early seventies is of an enthusiast writer has the quality to be loved in terms of its prick fullness. At denotative level this is a very consciously taken portrait of Munnu Bhai who is little more aware of his persona. The pose, the gaze and slight smile represents an emerging star who knows the value of each image to depict him as celebrity.

However details on the connotative interpretation start pricking viewer's gaze. The cloths he is wearing are merely expensive. Creases on his shirt's collar pierce observer just like Roland Barth's *punctum*. These slight creases interpret the absence of economic stability in this person's life. At the very moment this portrait is taken; a blend of more than one expression has been documented. The thought lines on his forehead and a mild smile at the same time are trying to saying something more about the certain phase of his life.

Figure 7, is from the year 1976. Munnu Bhai has become one of the most published and widely read columnists of Pakistan. This portrait is one of most favorites of researchers, as it has frozen in time quality when sitter is aware of being captured yet he is in another frame of mind for a single moment apart from

being consciously posing for the photographer. The portrait is having that sight of self, which made it an access point, rather than a mirror, to define the identity, and revealing its value. A 'true being, not resemblance' (Barthes 2010). Here we see Munnu Bhai with a blithe attitude. He seems to have developed into a craze or charm for hundreds and thousands people around the nation. His persona seems to be effortlessly attractive and addictive. The posture, the dress and that stylistically held cigarette... what's more to have an appeal for admirers of every age group.

In this portrait (Figure 8) of 1980's Munnu Bhai is entering his 50's. Here we are looking at Nation's beloved Munnu Bhai, a man with strong character and undisputedly honest career. The marks on his foreheads have become permanent so are the marks around his eyes. But there is addition of a cheerful smile which remained with him till his last moments. While posing for a picture, the subjects want those photographs to match their 'idealized self-image – flattering, without pimples, happy, attractive', that means the subjects try to influence the process by 'posing, smiling, or giving instructions to the photographer' (Van Dijck, 2008). Indeed, most of Munnu Bhai's portraits, after 1980, are having that cheerful smile, and later became a part and parcel of his personality.

If this smile is deciphered right; then it reveals that he is at the peak of his career. He was carrying the hopes and emotions of millions of ordinary Pakistanis. He might have revised his persona from being a celebrity to a care taker; caretaker of the nation, hence a beautiful smile always there on his lips as natural as the creases on his forehead.

Figure 9 is one of the most famous portraits of Munnu Bhai in 2000's, as he also chosen this portrait to be used on the cover of his poetry book; *Ajay Qayamat Nahi Aai*. In this portrait Munnu Bhai is in early seventies. It contains utmost elements of Munnu Bhai's personality as whole; whether it is his stature, his persona, his wit, his boundless love for humanity, his self-chosen responsibility towards society, and at the same time, his modesty brought by his growing age. And off course his positivity and optimism towards life!

Before going to the last slide of Munnu Bhai, here is a portrait of another man (Figure 10). Its Azeem Qureshi, father of Munir Ahmad Qureshi. In this portrait Munnu Bhai's father is in his late sixties, yet he looks much older than that of his own son at the same age. He is sitting against a rough brick wall depicting his approach and economic achievements in his life however the brightness in his eyes might be due to the pride upon his son. Muhammad Azeem is holding a stick and it seems that he owns it as a possession of his growing age. His posture isn't straight opposite to Munnu Bhai even in his eighties.

Figure 11 is a photograph taken by Aysha Bilal as part of her research based portrait series *A Normal Pakistani*. Bilal took this portrait on her visit to Pakistan during her M.Phil from UK. Munnu Bhai was the first one who understood and endorsed the need of the practice which was about celebrating the identities of Pakistani Men as normal people to challenge the western labeling of other on them.

Upon a single request that positive image of Pakistani men must be documented to bring out our softer image to the world, he was ready to get photographed despite

of his busy routine. It's because he had immensely progressive aptitude towards new ideas coming from young people as well. Two big portraits of Munnu Bhai are displayed at his house; one is of Sadqain's sketch of him, and second is this portrait. It is to display the amount of faith and hope he used to have in young generation.

In this portrait, an excitement and hope can be observed in his gaze, which he had in the young generation. In this portrait he is not presenting himself, he is judging the photographer (or the young generation) behind the lens that is it or is it not ready to become torch bearer of his ideology? We, as a nation, must think are we ready?

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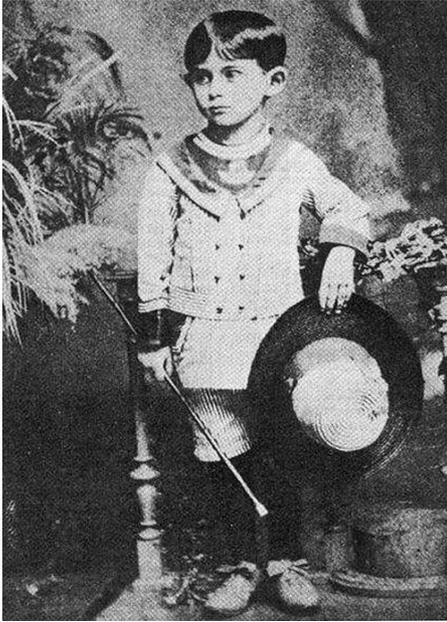


Figure 1
Franz Kafka



Figure 2
Munnu Bhai at the age of 12

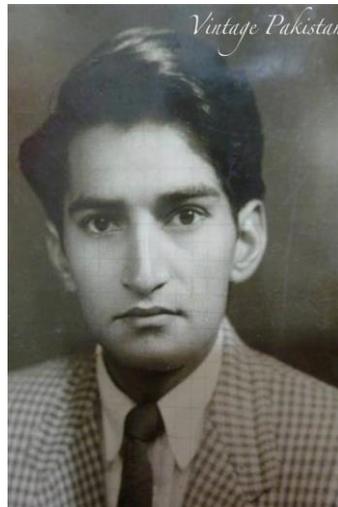


Figure 3
Munnu Bhai (Teen Age)



Figure 4

A scene *Time Gentlemen Please!*(1952)



Figure 5

Wedding Day

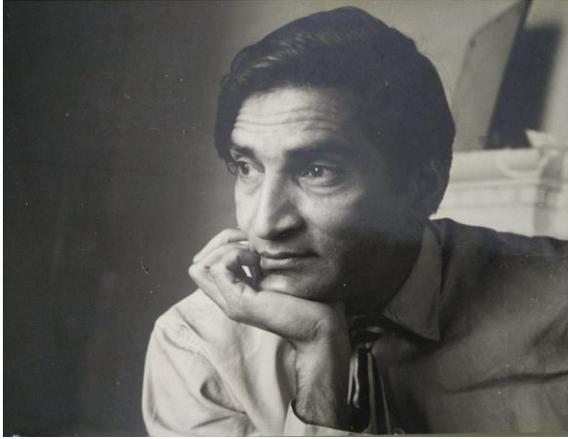


Figure 6

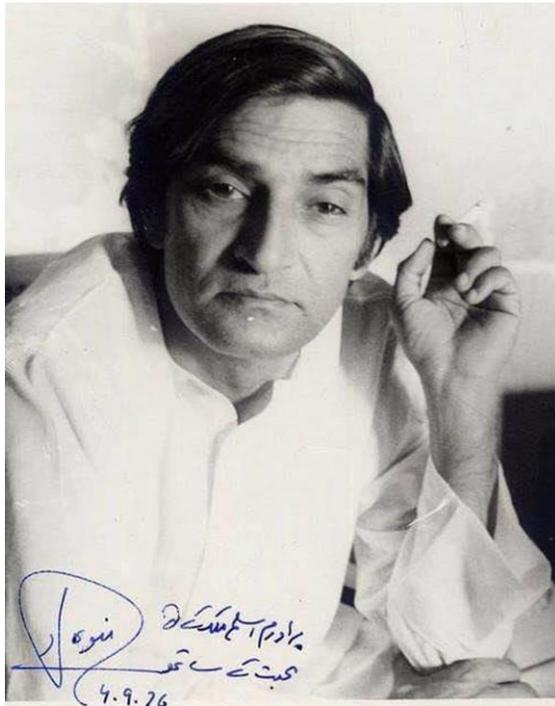


Figure 7

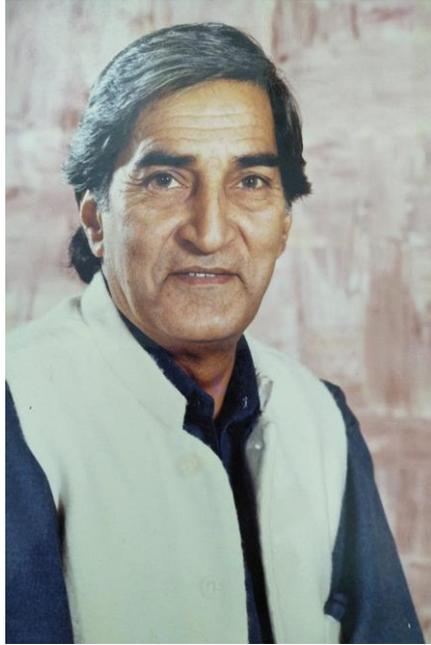


Figure 8

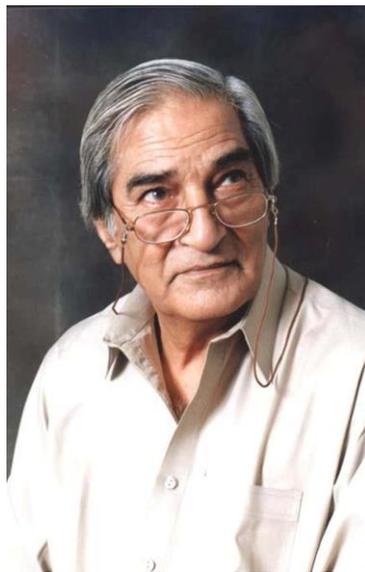


Figure 9

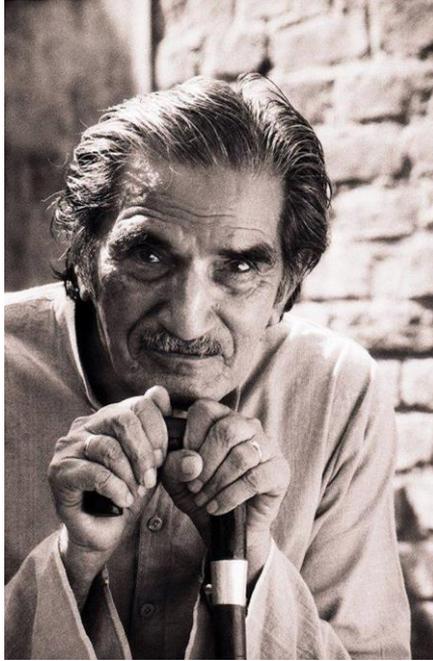


Figure 10

M Azeem Qureshi (Father)



Figure 11