Royal Melo Simulating the Green Vacation

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Abstract—**We like to cherish our holidays in an exotic space with a natural waterfall, streams of clean water carrying colorful fish, greenery, mountains, and, exotic animals that we do not see usually in our urban and semi-urban surroundings. What if you find all these extremes of enjoyment at the same place? Not only that, these sites are also accompanied with modern forms of enjoyment, food, and shopping malls. The modern urban development of simulated sites of enjoyment brings the answer. The majority of the population belonging to middle and lower classes now can savor exotic vacations, albeit momentarily. The present paper will try to understand the very process of simulation and its impact on the society at large. Here, Royal Melo at Vadodara will be taken as a case to understand the non-virtual simulation and people's response to it. The paper will try to evaluate the relationship between the reality, signs, and society using Baudrillard's ideas of simulacra and simulation (Baudrillard 1994). The representation of exotic and redefining the enjoyment are two most important aspects here and this paper will attempt to understand the process of semiosis both in real and mediated worlds.**

Index Terms—**Simulacra, Simulation, Sign, Symbol, Semiosphere, Urban space Baudrillard, Jean (1994 [1981]) Simulacra and Simulation (Tr. Sheila Faria Glaser). Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.**

I. INTRODUCTION

As Debord (1998: 142) states, "All that once was directly lived has become mere representation." The modern lifestyle is turning into spectacles, and the processes through which we used to please ourselves are also not an exception. Ecotourism is a new trend in which people go on tours to be closer to nature and have first-hand experience of being associated with nature. These tours and vacations are primarily governed by the economic status of the person and the amount of time the person has which allows them to visit various exotic spaces. But of course, everyone cannot afford those expensive and exotic fun and vacations. So, for a middle-class family such a vacation to some hill-station or some exotic place is something that comes once in their life. Now, as the good news for the middle-class community, a new set-up has arisen; this set-up offers a similar kind of fun and exotic experience to this class of people in their own urban setting. They do not have to travel much, they do not have to stay in expensive hotels, and above all this set-up comes at an affordable price.

This paper will try to evaluate one of such cases from the city of Vadodara. In the urban setting of Vadodara, "Royal Melo" is set-up from last year's Diwali vacation. "Melo" is a Gujarati word which is used for "fair", and as per the tradition, the fairs are associated with some religious festivals. They have ritualistic significance. But, this new urban set-up of 'Royal Melo', meaning "a fair for royal people", has a very secular setting, primarily governed by economic motives. This secular setting allows the larger target groups and maintains a parallel with the typical hill-stations and exotic outing spaces. Its strategic position in the urban domain also allows middle-class urban families and families from the surrounding villages and towns to visit without much economic risk. The section one below attempts to evaluate the Royal Melo using Bakhtinian ideas of carnival and carnivalesque. Section two evaluates the event under discussion from the perspective of simulation. The idea of "green vacation" with reference to Royal Melo is discussed in section three. Sections four and five explain the process of hyperreal and how it develops in Royal Melo. The last and sixth section provides fallacies of green vacation and general conclusions.

II. CARNIVAL AND CARNIVALESQUE

Bakhtin (1984) presents the idea of carnival as an event that temporarily subverts the social norms and the people can enjoy liberty and creativity. Festivals

and fairs often serve as a carnivalesque inversion of the everyday mundane life. They allow temporary liberation from the social constraints (Ravenscroft & Matteucci, 2003). The Royal Melo in question is like such an event, but not directly associated with any specific festival or religious or cultural fair. Rather this is a space with clear entry fee and open for all, irrespective of class, caste, gender, or religion.

On the surface, we are tempted to see the cultural phenomena of Royal Melo as a modern version of carnival. As it is identified as a world of liberation, destruction, and renewal, carnival offers the subject a completely new experience, an experience that is not part of the subject's normal socio-cultural life. The subjects here are the living present (Bakhtin, 1984); they consciously rely on present experience. It is a heterovoiced and hetero-styled space. The carnivalesque, as presented by Bakhtin, is marked with the inversion of hierarchies and spatio-temporally suspension of norms. Enjoyment and pleasure are the prime emotions of the subjects; everyone appears to be liberated and empowered. Here, all are participants without the differentiation of performers and spectators. Carnival, all the different types of festivities and celebrations, is clearly marked by the notion of inversion of norms.

'Royal Melo' is a modern carnival with slight variation from Bakhtin's idea of carnivalesque. And this comes with the very title - "Royal Melo", a very clear reference to the kind of people expected in the fair. The tag-line says, "Royal loko-no Royal Melo." Interestingly, it does not invite the 'Royals' and the elite class is not their primary audience. Their target is clearly the middle- and lower-middle-class people - the masses. Thus, the event title and the tag-line deliberately generate Barthian myth (Barth, 1972). Going by the title, whoever becomes the participant of this event, will be converted, or indexically treated as an individual from Royal background. So, everyone in the vicinity of Royal Melo is all equally royal, as all of them have paid the same price for entry. The subjects receive new experiences, and depending on their personal likings, they can choose what to enjoy more and what to leave behind. The variety is the game here. The subjects can enjoy the things in front of them: subjects can choose from an artificial stream with colorful fish in it, artificial waterfall, artificial jungle, and artificial greenery, aquariums with a variety of fishes, and an artificial lake with ducks and swans in it. You can also choose to see exotic animals and reptiles like turtles, tortoises, python, rattle-snake, rabbits, owl, hamsters, etc. Majority of these animals and reptiles are unknown for the urban population of Vadodara, especially for the kids of these middle-class families. The subject further moves in and shopping options are open, then games, and then marry-go-rounds and amusement-rides. Virtual reality stalls are also available where the subject can participate and enter select virtual reality. All these are accompanied by various food stalls, ice-creams, and fruit-dishes. And on top of that, you have a selfie-point too. So, as a participatory subject of Royal Melo, the individual has lots of options of enjoyment; a person may feel that s/he has all the possible pleasures of life.

Like carnival, there is multilinguality and multiculturalism in Royal Melo; there are people from different faiths, casts, and localities. But at the same time, it does not develop a polysemic discourse. It does not question the standard social norms. Rather, Royal Melo in a way supports and strengthens the social differences. One of the foremost characteristics of carnavalesque is the rebellion against the existing socio-political order which is missing from the Royal Melo. Bakhtin (Ibid: 124) mentions that mock crowning and subsequent decrowning of the carnival king is the primary carnivalistic act. This act is a symbolic gesture that satirizes and mocks power, but such a carnival king and the acts of crowning and decrowning is completely missing here. The 'royal' status assigned to each participant does not allow such an act. Irrespective of the polyphonic nature of the crowd, the event put all of them in the same box - Royals. They are all there, together, in the same geo-political-economic zone, but they are all strangers, acting and enjoying themselves in smaller groups. There are no specific kings, but by doing certain spectacles of getting attraction, subjects can assume momentary heroism. Similarly, getting on selfie-circles and shot by cameras in circular fashion, subjects can achieve celebrityhood.

Despite all the features, regular and modified, of carnival, the Royal Melo is different from the traditional idea of carnival. As mentioned earlier, the event does not question or satirize the standard narratives; it does not question social order. Moreover, the inclusion of choices, especially of the artificial and

exotic natural objects invite us to reconfigure the notions of "fair" and "carnival."

III. SIMULACRA AND SIMULATION

Fair (Melo) often presents a hyperreal version of culture, according to Nordin (2012). She also adds that such a representation often overshadows actual cultural practices. Colleta (2012) argues that fairs do not provide real cultural interaction and experience. Such events simulate interactions and experiences that feel real but are constructed. Such a simulation can bring a disconnection from authentic experiences, as the subjects are engaged with a curated environment and not genuine cultural expressions. Fabianski (2022), while talking about 'Hunger Games', also expresses a similar view and states that the hyperreality can lead to a collective inability to differentiate the simulated and the real. Thereby, it fosters a culture where experiences are manufactured and not really lived. Here, he focuses on the analysis of reality mapping. Xie (2025) also offers similar insights in her work on media technology.

As per the description of the event and the kinds of choices available to the subjects, the Melo is a polyvalent space (Baudrillard, 1994). It is designed for multiple purposes. The subjects can play games, enjoy marry-go-rounds or other such rides, eat, take selfies with people and nature. The space is multifaceted and multipurpose, at the same time, not defined by any traditional functions. As it is a paid space, it clearly has a boundary, the "in" and "out" is clearly defined, but within the space, where one aspect ends and another begins is vague.

Our society replaces reality with signs and symbols. Such a process of reconfiguring the world into 'hyperreal' has replaced our ability to objectively experience and describe the real. Baudrillard (1994) states that in this hyperreal world the copies become more real than the reality. Here, the real is encoded into signs and the entire semiosis process is repeated to create the impact of the real. Simulation presents a copy of the real and makes the reality more easily available and affordable. For example, a copy of the Taj Mahal is developed and then the tickets are charged to see it; people pay a nominal amount and get their photographs clicked in front of the simulation of the Taj Mahal. You do not have to travel to Agra to create your simulated experience of Taj Mahal. Those photographs are shared on various social media platforms where people see them in two-dimensional form and accept it as real. Interestingly, the real, pristine experience of the monument is not the primary objective in this process, rather the click-able and post-able document is the motive. Those pictures and comments and likes on those pictures are gradually replacing the real experience of the monument.

According to Baudrillard's (1994) theories of simulacra and simulation, fairs and events produce hyperreal experiences that conflate representation and reality. Like Disneyland, they represent idealized fantasies where the experience is manufactured rather than real, emphasizing illusion over real engagement. He also illustrates that such events and fairs are more about spectacle than about real cultural exchange or experience. They normally present the idealized version of reality. Here, the copy of the Taj Mahal, following Plato's ontology, is inferior to the ideal form of which it is a copy, i.e. the Taj Mahal in the present case (Cochrane, 1999: 359). Cochrane (Ibid) further adds in the entry that, "The general consensus is that the simulacrum is not simply a copy of the copy: it somehow avoids contact with the idea form." Considering the case of Royal Melo, it is safe to say that simulacrum avoids the general population to get in touch with the real.

When we consider the idea of simulation as presented by Baudrillard (1994), the idea of masses is also important here. According to him, a large undifferentiated group of people characterized by their passivity, susceptibility, and a lack of critical engagement. This notion is important because here, we can clearly see how the participants of this fair are different from the carnival. The participants of the fair are collectively the masses and they do not form a community. Here, the participants are turned into spectators, passive consumers without the critical awareness and outlook on the given event.

IV. GREEN VACATION

It has become a norm that at least once in a year, the families go for a trip, preferably, at places which have maintained their natural beauty. Streams, waterfalls, jungles, etc. are in the priority list. Hill-stations surrounded by mountains and beaches are very

popular destinations. One of the objectives here is that the family could live in a pollution free environment and will have direct experience of true nature. In the process, they also get to see and know the living creatures in their natural habitat. Such a tourism industry is now popular as eco-tourism. Such an idea of eco-tourism comes with certain socio-economic and environmental objectives. It gives jobs to local people and directly-indirectly boosts the local economy. And since the people come there to witness environmental serenity and purity, efforts are also made to maintain the local ecology. Though there are many important positive aspects in this idea of ecotourism, some negative outcomes are also documented (Bhattacharya & Dey, 2013; Acharya, et al. 2020; Doronkina et al., 2014; Kakumanu & Rao, 2021; Qing, 2001; Sapkota, 2023).

Unfortunately, not all subjects can afford this kind of ecotourism; primarily due to economic concerns, most of the Indian population cannot afford the annual family trip to a destination of their choice. This gap is identified and attempted to be fulfilled by local urban events like Royal Melo. As mentioned above, they create artificial jungles, streams, ponds, and mountains for the people to enjoy. This is in the urban space, people do not have to travel to exotic destinations, and here subjects spend three to five hours, and hence no need to buy a stay. It is referred to as "green vacation" and not "ecotourism" as the subjects are not in a new eco-sphere, they are still in their regular urban settlement, where one space is identified for this fair. At the same time, the subjects are not out on some real tour, rather they will be spending some hours enjoying the fair. Of course, they will have to 'vacate' a certain time-slot for the same. Hence, it will be better to refer to it as "green vacation" and not "ecotourism". Considering this idea of 'green vacation', the paper will restrict the discussion to the artificially created natural spaces, such as water bodies, mountains, and visibility of exotic animals.

V.   ENTERING THE HYPERREAL

Once a subject pays the entry fees and enters into the Melo, the subject passes through a corridor that connects the real and mundane world and imaginary, exotic, and adventurous world, this corridor transforms the subject into a spectator, a passive consumer. The spectator enters into a forest with a small stream. The spectator becomes an active consumer, cameras of their phones become active and they start documenting the spectator's adventurous journey. Move ahead and the passage has a flowing stream of clean water with colorful fishes on one side and a huge mountain on the other side. Not only the fishes but also clean water is a matter of exclusivity for the spectators. By this time, even if a particular spectator is not engaged in taking pictures and selfies, the fellow spectators will make him/her take pictures as everybody around them is taking pictures. Here, the spectator's witnessing exclusive spectacle is secondary and the spectator's creation of evidence to be part of this simulacrum is primary. The real enjoyment and experience come in the virtual world of social media when people would start liking and commenting on this evidence. A good number of spectators also prefer to go live on social media to incorporate their followers and friends in their journey into hyperreal.

Image 1: Beginning of Melo, artificial greenery

Image 1b: Beginning of Melo, artificial greenery

Image 2: Second part, artificial stream

Image 4: Artificial waterfall

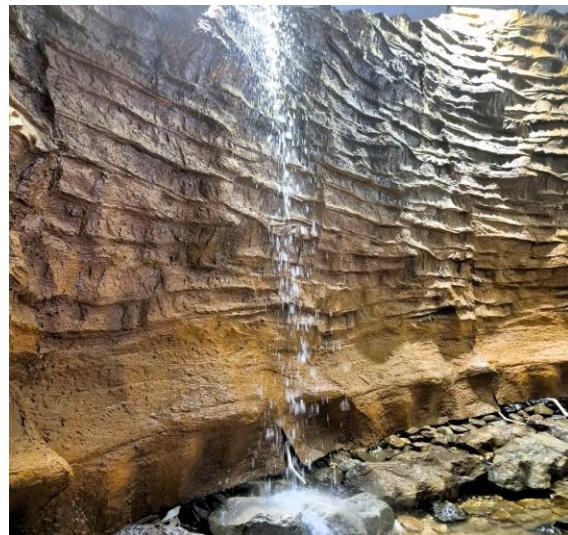Image 3: Third part, artificial mountain

When the spectator moves ahead, the other side of the mountain is visible. Interestingly, this side is embellished with a waterfall, we can clearly see water falling from the mountain. This waterfall never goes dry, if there are spectators, the waterfall is active. The water falls to be seen, to be clicked, and to be part of social media posts.

Behind the mountain, the spectator can witness a pond inhabited by swans and ducks. On the border of the pond, aquariums are placed, all of them containing fishes of various colors and breeds. A little ahead, there are a few caged animals and reptiles. Most of these creatures are not found in urban landscapes and hence they are interesting for the spectators. From the entry gate till the exit from this section of exotic animals, spectators are not supposed to pay anything other than entry fee, but once this section is over, spectators will encounter everything for which they will have to pay, such as various objects and utensils to shop, games to play, boating for kids, various amusement swings, virtual reality box, selfie point, toy train, and various food items. If we read carefully, section one is a replica of forest and greenery, section two is stream of water with fish, section three is mountain and waterfall, section four is pond and aquariums, and section five is display of exotic creatures. All the artificial or artificially inhabited things in all these five sections are cordoned and spectators are not supposed to touch them or go very close to them. But it allows the spectators to click good pictures. The boundary must be for security and safety

purposes, but it allows one to maintain an indifference towards the objects under gaze. There are other sections, but all of them come with a tag of 'pay and use.' This is exactly where the real fair begins and most of the spectators spend far more time here.

Image 5: Aquarium by the pond

Image 6: Ducks in the pond

Image 7a: Exotic reptile

Image 7b: Python

Image 7c: Hamster family

VI. HYPERREAL AND GREEN VACATION

One of the major objectives of ecotourism is to sensitize people about the environment. To make them aware about the environment, its importance, and the current issues. To deliver economic advantage to the local community is a secondary objective. When the same pristine environment is simulated and hyperreal ecology is developed, the spectators do not get attached to the environment, they do not develop feelings for the objects, creatures, and artificially created pristine nature. Here, the difference between the real and simulated experience is very important. Imagine you are at a stream, what is the first thing you will do? You will try to put your feet or hands in the flowing water. But here the stream is clearly cordoned and the spectators must "see" it. You are not allowed to climb the mountain, nor are you allowed to place your hand in the falling water of the waterfall. You cannot play with the ducks or swans, neither will you be afraid of the python or snake. Thus, all the

experiences you will be collecting are cordoned and calculated.

Another such boundary we must face in this Melo is the roof. From entrance till the end of section five - the section of exotic animals, the spectators are constantly under the roof. It means that though the spectators are witnessing the simulation of nature, they are constantly reminded of the non-natural setting. Roofs and cordons are constant reminders that "nature" is not infinite and resourceful. Spectators see the greenery but the need for the greenery is consciously kept out; the sky is not visible, no sun, no sunlight. The natural resources of water, including rain, are not allowed within the boundaries of the Melo. In the case of exotic animals, one more boundary, i.e. cages are added - the cordons are for humans, and the cages are for creatures.

These two boundaries - roof and cordons - are the signs that clearly project two binaries for the green vacation. The roof is a boundary between the real and simulated, everything under that roof is simulated and the spectators are part of that simulation. The subject enters and the roof begins; it is a reminder to the subject that s/he is in an artificial world with a sky of its own. It implies that the given space has its own ecology; its own streams, waterfalls, ponds, and mountains. They will give a different experience to the subjects.

Cordon develops the binary opposition of the spectacle and spectator. Everything that is seen is on the other side of the cordon. This side, i.e. the spectator's side is dynamic, they move, the other side is fixed. The spectator is not allowed to cross the cordon. Spectators can see and enjoy nature, but they cannot get closer to it and have a first-hand experience, precisely because it is simulated nature. Such a cordon also raises the concerns of nature versus culture; this simulated nature cannot provide the real experience of collaborating and enjoying with nature, because this simulated nature is also created by the consumerist culture.

This kind of simulated nature is possible, primarily, because we have already created the binary of nature and culture. These binary places the humans under culture, something that is opposite to nature. This binary has also allowed us - the humans - to use and consume nature and natural resources. And this very Melo is a result of this consumerist outlook on nature,

through this simulation we are made to believe that humans can generate nature at their own will, they can control it, and they can make it a matter of spectacle for everyone. This Melo comes from the same ideology in which the common people are not allowed to go for the ecocriticism and they need to be satisfied with the green vacation.

VII. CONCLUSION: FALLACIES OF GREEN VACATION

The Royal Melo can easily be portrayed as a site of pleasure for the common man. It is pocket friendly, and apart from offering wholesome family experience, it attempts to bring the people closer to nature by offering them first-hand experience of witnessing nature and exotic creatures. Such a one-to-one interaction between subjects and nature will develop a good bonding and affection for nature and natural creatures. This is a normal belief of the people who visit this Royal Melo. But this hyperreal green vacation is far away from developing or maintaining the good bond between the spectators and the simulated nature. Because the very simulation is the sign of human created-ness, it is something developed by and under the control of the humans. So instead of developing bonds, spectators tend to develop the hegemonic relationship with the nature they witness. Another indifference is generated though the digital frame. Most of the spectators are there taking pictures of each other or taking selfies with each other, the simulated nature is just there to provide the background to the frames they create. Obviously, the major concern of the subject of the photograph is to represent self in the most appealing manner, the spectators, while taking photographs, are not concerned about the appearance and importance of nature that they are keeping in the background. Many of these photographs reach social media timelines of the visitors which their friends and followers can view, like, and comment on. This act of uploading the images on social media serves two functions: first, for the spectators, it is a matter of self-gratification that they have had the opportunity of being "Royal" and they could click pictures which are close to nature. Second, for the organizers of the fair, it is an advertisement, done by satisfied customers, that will bring more customers. However satisfied you are with

these simulated natural set-ups, you as a spectator will spend a maximum forty minutes to an hour under the roof. Because this is just an entry point for the rest of the enjoyment sections. So, for many, walking slowly in this natural hyperreality is also an obstacle to reach the shopping areas and joy rides.

The environment is an important issue today. And hence ecotourism has become an important area; there are both advantages and disadvantages of it. But the biggest disadvantage is that only a few privileged class people can have access to this form of vacation. As a remedy to this economic gap, events like the "Royal Melo" came into existence in urban spaces, as these spaces contain a maximum number of middle and lower-middle class population. Modeled and named after the traditional fairs, yet away from traditional carnivals. Such events know nature is not an enticement to attract people, rather it is projected as a tool to frame the memories, and the real enjoyment comes when the spectators "cross" the nature. This simulated-nature walk signifies good background to the social media posts of the spectators. It generates the hegemonic relationship between the spectators and the spectacle, and reaffirms the superiority of human-culture and places the humans out of the realm of nature.

Baudrillard identifies four levels of signs in terms of its relation with reality. The first is reflection which is a faithful copy of reality; second level masks or distorts reality; third level of pretense masks the absence of reality; and fourth level of sign, simulacrum bears no relation to any reality. Royal Melo masks the absence of the real; the access to real nature is hidden, the entire green vacation is a pretense. It is a pretense of the creators to present the nature to the people, at the same time, it is also a pretense of the creators, in the way that they do not visit the nature, they just visit a space, fully aware about its hyperreal aspect, to bring it in their photo-frames and social media.

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