



## RE-VISITING THE DISCOURSE OF ABSTRACTION WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO AS HOW IT IS PLACED IN MODERN ART IN INDIA

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### ABSTRACT:

*For centuries, the artist was thought of someone who holds a mirror up to nature. Informed by the imitation theories the seminal feature of art was based on the principle of representation, which amounted to the objective depiction of the outward appearances of the things or objects or the external world that we inhabit. The authority of imitation theory guided the course of art right from Plato's concept of mimesis up to the impressionist credo "we paint what we see". By late nineteenth and early twentieth century, on the one hand satiated with the imitation theory because camera can do better, and on the other hand confronted with the impermanence of the world outside and uncertainty of life in the midst of post-war crisis, artists were wanted to see the world afresh. Artists, seemingly, turned their back towards the objective outside world of appearances and, instead, plunged inwards into the world of subjectivity. Abstraction not only dominated as a general tendency of modernism in the west but also had a discernible presence in other non-western cultures. And whether this presence was received as an influence or impact or inspiration or difference remains to be a matter of contestation that the present paper tries to address. The present paper aims to re-visit the discourse of abstraction in the western modernism and locate its position in the modern art in India.*

**KEYWORDS:** abstraction, formalism, modernism, modern art in India, Indigenism, Indian aesthetics.

### INTRODUCTION:

For centuries, plastic arts across cultures, has served mythologies, religion, aristocracy, state, social or political propaganda, private or public patronage, or has been simply an imitation of nature or representation of visible realities. In modern times the writers as well as artists have often wondered why plastic arts has not been able to exercise its autonomy as, for instance, music does. Nobody would generally feel the need to wonder what Beethoven's composition was all about? Or after listening to Hariprasad Chaurasia's flute an immediate response would generally never be in the form of a question: what is it? And if someone did dare to ask such a question it would naturally amount to a certain absurdity that can only be subsided/answered by a loud laughter. Why such a generality remained oblivious in plastic arts for so many years? The question invokes the perennial discourse on art as imitation or representation, which found a rigorous addressal in the late nineteenth century western artist's shift/flip from outward to inward order of things, thus, marking a great break from the tradition. The authority of imitation theory, stretched as far as Plato's mimesis, passing through its disappearance and then reappearance/resurrection in Renaissance until its fall in the nineteenth century, foregrounded the new 'truth in painting' in work of Cezanne, Manet, Gauguin, Van Gough, Seurat and so on. Or what takes off from them as a standpoint when artists ceased to paint what they saw, and on the contrary, saw what they are painting.

This reversion from painting what you see to seeing what you paint has something crucial to do with the invention of camera. Photography outwitted painting in the competition/race for verisimilitude. Photography caused a grave dint in the *raison d'être* of painting as faithful representation of the outside visible world. This faith suffered a great deal as soon as the results of camera challenged the skilled-genius's innovations that were held to be objective as scientific absolutes. A painting, no matter how rigorous in its verisimilitude, can no way compare with the verisimilitudes of a photograph. At this juncture of art history, it seems, art should have declared its death. However, art did not die rather it only killed its father – the Platonic-Aristotelian theory of imitation. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, there is a paradigm shift as artists are strongly deviating, resisting or subverting the centuries old commitment to imitation theory.

In the backdrop of imitation theory/representational theory photography and painting confronted each other. Intimidated with this new magical device artists struggled to find new ways to survive. Among these new ways, abstraction proved to be one of the most convincing and sustainable rescues. In the Impressionists paintings the things that appeared recognizable from a distance appeared just a medley of dots and dabs if looked from the close. Cezanne broke down the perceptual world into pure elementary units such as cubes, spheres and cylinders. Like an architect, engrossed in the arrangement of these basic units, he sacrificed drawing, anatomy, proportion for the sake of overall compositional harmony. Cezanne, held for long as the father of modern art, demonstrates the first canon of art taking a U-turn from the imitation/representation theory. Cezanne's breakthrough finds a robust manifestation in Cubism, hence launching abstraction as one of the most seminal paradigms of modernism.

Informed by Cezanne's emphasis to see nature in terms of cubes, spheres or cylinders the Cubists distorted nature to the extend of unrecognizability. Taking off from Van Gough's plunge into the inward-subjective world German expressionist painters, and later abstract expressionists, took the outward simulation of things for granted and, on the contrary, indulged in the gestural or guttural or emotive quality of a painting, or in other words, to achieve the painterliness of a painting. The geometric abstractions of artists like Mondrian or Malevich or lyrical abstractions of Kandinsky are quintessentially an outcome of a painting based on the principle that art has got nothing to do with anything except itself.

This juncture of modern art not only refutes the imitation theory, but, at the same time, critiques it. As Noel Carol writes: 'Contemplating the examples of twentieth-century art, I think we are inclined to realize that the imitation theory never got it quite right. Minimalist art, for instance, reminds us that there was always visual art of pure visual design, from carpets and pottery to illuminated texts and Islamic wall patterns. The history of pure visual decoration is as longstanding as the history of figuration.'<sup>1</sup>

Carol further tries to counteract by foregrounding the difference between imitation theory and representation theory in order to present the defense to the critique of Platonic-Aristotelian stand. Representation is held to be broader than imitation, 'since something can also stand for something else without looking like it'. For example, 'the paintings of Mondrian represent something – such as ultimate reality-without rendering its literal appearance.'<sup>2</sup> However, Carroll concludes that in spite of the broader scope of representational theory there still is a great deal of art that does not represent anything and hence 'it is too exclusive to serve as a general theory of art.' And therefore, even the broader representational theory is susceptible to counterexamples, such as the great traditions of decorative arts across the world demonstrating pure play of forms, colors and inter-relationships and without any ambition or anxiety to represent anything. The recent variant to the representational theory, called neo-representational theory, does address broader issues. Its claim that 'anything that is a work of art necessarily possesses the property of aboutness – it has semantic content; it has a subject about which it expresses something,' makes it much more open-ended and potentially competent to qualify as a general theory of art than the previous theories. For example, 'Guernica is an artwork because 'it is about aerial bombardment, about which it expresses horror.'<sup>3</sup> But then, Carrell argues, is neo-representationalism a general theory of art? Neo-representationalism holds that aboutness or

semantic content is a necessary condition of all art works. The central defining property of art that representational theory proposes – being about something – is more comprehensive than the one advanced by representational theory – standing for something else. For example, *Guernica* is about horrors of war, but it does not stand for or represent horror.

But how does neo-representational theory address non-representational art, which is in other words is called abstract art? Since neo-representational theory does claim that even a non-figurative or non-representational artwork possesses expressive properties and that this is what such works are about. Carroll argues that this proposition is problematic. ‘Suppose a piece of pure orchestral music is sad. Is this really what it is about? Does it truly have a subject, sadness, about which it expresses something? Does the possession of a property amount to being about the property?’ Similarly, if a painting possess the property redness, mere possession of the property hardly counts as being about redness. It is here the neo-representational theory fails to deliver. The reason to bring in the question of a general theory of art is to position the discourse of abstraction vis-à-vis art theory. By discussing all the three theories of imitation, representation and neo-representation it becomes evident none is qualified to address abstraction. In other words, abstraction as a nonrepresentational art is antithesis to the representational theory and its sub-categories. But then what theory of art can articulate or advocate or critique the nonrepresentational art?

The eighteenth century Romantic movement is the cite to locate the seeds of the paradigm shift when the most driving force for an ambitious artists was not to preoccupy with the objective world and its apparent realities but turn inwards to explore their subjective experiences. The shift is best epitomized when Wordsworth defines poetry as “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”. The Romantics unburdened the artist from the labor of imitation or representation and invested, instead, with the labor of love. For a Romantic artist, a poem or a painting is primarily an emotional response to what he or she contemplates. This Romantic principle is one of the strongest undercurrent or stimulus behind the tantalizing stories of modern artists as rebels, outcasts, anarchists, iconoclasts.

Romanticism, while resisting the imitation/representational theory, anticipated a new theory that responds to the self and the emotional experience, which came to be known as expression theory of art. As argues by Carroll, Expression theories claim that ‘art is essentially involved in bringing feelings to the surface, bringing them outward where they can be perceived by artists and audiences alike.’ ‘Romanticism called our attention to the artist’s portion in the creation of an artwork— to the fact that an artwork embodies the artist’s attitudes, feelings, emotions, and/or point of view toward his subject. Romanticism emphasized these features of the artwork forcefully.’<sup>4</sup>

One of the contributions of expression theory is held in terms of outlining a comprehensive differences in the roles played by science and art. The previous theories of art treated the work of the artist as akin to that of the scientist, which by nineteenth century had made art look inferior to science. Expression theories struck an ideal balance between the share of roles science and art should undertake. The role of science is to explore the objective outer world of nature and the role of art is to explore the subjective inner world of feelings and emotions. In this way expression theory not only explains what art is but, at the same time, empowers it with a sense of purpose that science cannot address.

After expression theory, and in fact more fiercely, formalism developed as a reaction to representational theories of art. And perhaps, of all the theories discussed so far, formalism is in a better position to address the discourse of abstraction. Modern art or modernism’s inclination toward abstraction can be rigorously placed in the discourse of formalism. Modern artist was not interested in capturing the perceptual appearance of the visible world around him, but, invested his or her artistic sensibilities to explore the visual possibilities of form, structure, space and design. As Paul Klee, one of the seminal abstract artist, would say, “the function of art is not to reproduce the visible; it makes visible.”

Formalism as a doctrine extrapolates the abstract qualities of an artwork such as the pictorial or plastic possibilities in terms of shapes, lines, colors, textures, space, structures and so on. In this sense abstraction is a subcategory of formalism. As formulated by the influential English theorist, Clive Bell,

what determines whether or not a painting is art is its possession of significant form. That is, a painting is art if and only if it has a salient design. Apparently, formalism was meant to subscribe only to abstract art. But its broad all encompassing range, as articulated by Bell, relates it to artworks of all times. Because significant form is a property comprising of "arrangements of lines, colors, shapes, volumes, vectors, and space," the material qualities that all artworks possess. For instance, why is Manet often considered as the father of modern painting, because he was the first painter who taught us to see a painting "through their surface distortions." Unlike painters before him, for Manet the content was the means and the form was the end. He always stressed on seeing through the traces; the evidences left behind by the painter's brush strokes, unmodulated color patches, areas of paint left intentionally unfinished. He taught us to see abstraction in alteration, transformation, distortion, subversion. Manet's inclination or anticipation for abstraction lies in subtlety of the traces, marks, evidences he intentionally left behind in his paintings so that, no matter how lofty the subject of his painting may be, at the end of the day the viewer must realize he or she is witnessing a picture – a painting made up of paints or pigments. He is providing a double experience to the viewer; a subject profound in its daring stance and subversion and a painting rich and dauntless in its painterly outspokenness.

What formalism argues in its defense that all art possesses significant form, irrespective of the fact whether it is representational or non-representational, finds an interesting example in Manet's portrait of Emile Zola (1868), and as an extreme case, in the Whistler's portrait of his mother (1871). The Manet's portrait of Zola anticipated the criticism that the artist was primarily interested in the act of painting and of representing visual experiences rather than in the subject-matter depicted, thus aligning Manet's approach to the prevailing avant-garde theory of 'art for art's sake'.<sup>5</sup> Manet sets Zola, a towering literary figure, outside the pale of public posturing into an intimate and closed space. There is a deliberate de-emphasis on "Zola's ostensible centrality among superfluity of objects and images, denying the sitter his primacy", Andre Dombrowski writes. "Manet constructed the portrait as if Zola, too, like the mass-produced objects that surround him, was subject to the conditions of reproducibility. He is represented almost as flat, framed and color-contrasted as the pamphlets, prints, photograph and screen that clutter and compete for the viewer's attention. Zola emerges in the portrait as more "sign" than substance."<sup>6</sup> Even more scathing criticism comes by way of Odilon Redon who said that, Manet had sacrificed the "man and his ideas for fine techniques, for the successful accessory," shown Zola "rather like a still life, so to speak, than the expression of a human being." The abstract qualities of Whistler's Mother, which originally is titled as "Arrangement in Grey and Black No 1", lie in his aesthetic experiment to 'modulate tones of black and grey in a way that made them legible in half-light.' An adherent of 'art for art's sake', Whistler is known for his resistance to mimetic representation. His mother's portrait has graduated into a pulp icon not as much for its abstract qualities, which the artist held as prime, but for its emotional subject as a portrait of mother. As a self-claimed formalist, Whistler's Arrangement in Grey and Black is primarily a painting, in which he strives to achieve a significant arrangement of tonal variants, shape, volume, space and so on. Yet he chooses the portrait idiom, presumably, to subvert the dichotomy underlying the binaries of representation and non-representation. It is primarily because of its paradoxical position for swaying between form and content or abstract and representational, it has garnished so much importance that even today theorists are inclined to re-visit it. Both the positions, artists' intent and what becomes of it in the world of viewers, become significant when the Barthean reshuffling of author/reader is invoked.

Abstraction is not a movement or an ism, such as fauvism, cubism, expressionism, constructivism and so on, but it is something that maneuvers across the avant-gardism of modernism as a broad tendency or an aesthetic attitude. Informed by the aesthetic or artistic relativism or to subscribing to the aesthetic agenda of empowering art with autonomy or art as a goal in itself, one of the common drives that all the modes or stances of abstraction have in common is this irresistible urge to for 'seeing' things differently, freshly and innovatively. For the modern artists of Europe the world outside and the outside order of things had lost its credibility in the post-world war human crisis. Confronted with the impermanence and uncertainty of the external empirical realities the artists plunged into the internal world of self, emotions, subconscious, archetypal/primordial realities.<sup>7</sup>

Of all the isms or movements of modern art abstraction is notorious for sharing the most incommensurable equation with other artistic or aesthetic traditions and has often resisted any comprehensible understanding or classification. The three most dominant (and at the same time problematic) artistic tendencies during the period of wars in the west have often been classified as abstraction, Realism, and Surrealism. These three tendencies were as much indebted to each as they were incompatible. While the abstraction of Piet Mondrian may not share anything with Surrealism. At the same time we cannot simply dismiss Andre Breton's claim that the abstraction of Paul Klee and Joan Miro was born out of Surrealist movement.<sup>8</sup>In the midst of this somewhat dubious identity of abstraction, a noted English art critic and philosopher Herbert Read is known to have said that 'it was the abstract artists who were the true revolutionaries.'<sup>9</sup>Man Ray, primarily, known for his association with Dada and later Surrealism, has shown a strong confirmation to the formalist discourse of abstraction in his early Statement of 1916. He states: "The creative force and the expressiveness of painting reside materially in the color and texture of pigment, in the possibilities of form invention and organization, and in the flat plane on which these elements are brought to play...He uncovers the pure plane of the expression that has so long been hidden by the glazing's of nature imitation, anecdote, and the other popular subjects...The artist is concerned solely with linking these absolute qualities directly to his wit, imagination, and experience, without the go-between of a 'subject.'<sup>10</sup>

Mondrian held that the tragic in life leads to art because of its abstract quality as it is opposed to the concrete reality. And it is by means of this abstract quality it can 'anticipate the gradual disappearance of the tragic.' "The more the tragic diminishes the more art gains purity."<sup>11</sup> He states: "In New Plastic, painting no longer expresses itself through the corporeality of appearance that gives it a naturalistic expression. To the contrary, painting is expressed plastically by plane within plane. By reducing three-dimensional corporeality to a single plane, it expresses pure relationship."<sup>12</sup>

It is interesting to recall Kasimir Malevich's defense of abstraction when he hits at the society's double standards by holding on to old art as lofty and dismissing new or modern art as simplistic. It is important to recall the orthodox position, vis-à-vis Malevich's iconic work white square on white, *White on White*, 1918, that one must have a special talent or skill to draw like Raphael or Rubens, 'whilst modern art is very simple as any one can draw a square'. Malevich counteracts the criticism with a satirical preposition by comparing the primitive method of getting fire by rubbing stones with the modern method of lighting a matchbox to get fire. Malevich, being a strong critique of imitative art, rejected it as old and redundant. For him artists are a creative army playing as significant a role in movement of a new world as any other social or political revolution.

Back home, in India, the imitation theory or representational theory never really occurred in the historical consciousness of Indian culture the way it did in the west. Barring a few isolated examples, such as Mughal emperor Jahangir's attraction for European naturalism, it was not until the colonial instructions to local Indian artists to adopt European methods of pictorial representation that Indian art was truly exposed to the concept of western tradition of art as imitation. In Indian thought the notion of abstraction or non-figurative does not strictly amount to moving away from the idea of art as imitation. Abstraction, on the contrary, "points at a notion of art as an imaginatively free and autonomous activity that aims at creating something meaningful in itself, without a dependence on something outside of it". As pointed out by Mukun Lath that the concept of art based on the notion of non-dependence on external world and as an imaginative world of its own, which essentially defines abstraction as a radical posture in terms of Western 'modernity', has been in practice in Indian thought for quite a long time ago.<sup>13</sup>Lath goes further in deconstructing the Western notion of abstraction as a moving away from the actual world and presupposes that even imitation implies abstraction as it transforms the given in reproducing it. Lath invokes the double-edged aesthetics of Bharata and other Indian aestheticians as a characteristic that underlies the perennial Indian aesthetic claim that, on the one hand, art can, simultaneously, be representational and non-representational, and on the other hand, all art is abstract. He writes: " The modern mode of abstraction is but a new way of doing it, for, otherwise, the whole history of the visual arts has plainly been an exercise in abstraction, though the word may not have been used, and what was done may have been understood as imitation."<sup>14</sup>

In modern India, the advent of abstraction vis-à-vis Indian modernism is confronted with a certain crisis. On the one hand we get to see sterile versions of European way of articulating abstract vocabulary and on the other hand artists are working out ways to accommodate selective modernism by means of the shift in focus from internationalism to regionalism.<sup>15</sup>The 1950s and 60s Indian art scene is characterized by renewed longing and search for "Indianess" to secure a sustainable notion of authentic in the midst of the post-independent cultural crisis, the colonial hangover, and more particularly the westernized adaptations in the context of Indian modern art. The crisis in nationalist identity and the sovereignty of Indian nation-state share a deep synchronic moment with the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Revivalism of Bengal School and the 50s yearning for indigenous authenticity, generally called as the "Indigenist Trends". In 40s and 50s the avant-gardism of Progressive art movements in its reaction to the Nationalist/Revivalist fixity of Bengal school had left open the floodgate of western art, which brought in a deliberate Western oriented modernistic sensibility of a quasi-figurative mode. However, in 60s many seminal modern artists of India were adopting or adapting to the abstractionist mode of painting. As Geeta Kapur writes, 'We developed a quiet, almost quiescent, aesthetic. The...figure was withdrawn from the work of some of the major Indian artists, leaving behind the merest signs of the human presence in nature.'<sup>16</sup>It was around this time that the discourse of indigenous gathered momentum in the global modernism and the identity crisis that the modern Indian artist was confronted with. K C Paniker's great initiative in the form of Cholamandal Artists Village and his selective modernism, for adapting and preferring ancient Indian visual vocabulary of signs and symbols, over adaptations of European and American abstraction, he set forth a mature, sustainable and aesthetically authentic language of Indian modern abstraction – the language that articulates and realizes the abstractions of great Indian artists such as V.S Gaitonde, Jerram Patel, Nasreen Mohammadi, Munuswamy, K M Adimoolam, G R Santosh, Biren De, Sohan Qadri and so on.

#### NOTES:

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