

# THE CONCEPT OF CREATIVITY IN TRADITIONAL INDIAN ART

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## ABSTRACT

*Rather than recording the details of their own ephemeral existence, the traditional people think it more important to write about the legendary and heroic characters. However unimportant one's own life and the lives of one's own associates may be, these provide the only authentic window into the life-situations as such. The traditional people therefore achieve in their lives an interesting symbiosis of the temporal and the eternal. Instead of writing about his own experience of conjugal relations, Kalidasa chooses to write about the love of Shiva and Parvati in Kumarasambhavam. He lends his own feelings to the love of Shiva and Parvati, and consequently concretizes his own experiences through the paradigm of Shiva and Parvati. Undoubtedly, impersonation is a common feature of all dramatic art; but traditional drama essentially rests upon the replay of certain myths or legends. It must be kept in mind that it is in this re-enactment of these myths and legends that the traditional Indian artist achieves the fulfillment of his creative urge. But, to be sure, re-enactment does not mean mechanical repetition. This sense of creativity is quite at variance with our contemporary understanding of the term. For traditional artists creativity lies in their transfiguring the eternal into images, in being original in the sense of turning to the original – the primeval. Traditional art forms do not set so many stores by novelty and extraordinary creative independence as by a skillful and innovative use of already existing parameters of artistic excellence. The fact that the traditional artist does not experiment with the vagaries of his whims and fancies does not imply that his work is hackneyed and has no ingeniousness about it.*

**Key Words:** Creativity, Re-enactment, Paradigm, Traditional, Novelty, Primeval, Innovation

In traditional Indian texts, there is no treatise on aesthetics as an abstract theoretical study involving a conceptual analysis of art in general. In fact, it would not be inappropriate to say that aesthetics in India was more a study of criticism in different art genres than a philosophical study of art. The answer to the problem how traditional Indian theorists saw creativity in different art forms is dependent on how the traditional people viewed cosmic creation. For traditional people, as Mircea Eliade points out, every creation has a paradigmatic model – the creation of the universe by the gods.<sup>1</sup> For them, their labor was only repetition of primordial act, the transformation of chaos into cosmos by the divine act of creation. In traditional Indian art, the creative process which informed the labor of the traditional artist reflects the same paradigmatic model. In the *Dhvanyaloka*, Anandvardhana compares the poet to Prajapati (the divine creator of the universe), because his creation emulates the

cosmic creation: “In the boundless realm of poetry, the poet alone is the creator, and as it pleaseth him, so doth this world revolve.”<sup>2</sup> Mammata also has expressed the same idea in *kavyaprakasha* –

“Victorious is the Poet’s speech which unfolds a creation, which is unfettered by the rules of providence (or Nature), which consists of joy alone, which is not dependent on anything else, and which is charming on account of nine (or new) sentiments.”<sup>3</sup>

Rather than recording the details of their own ephemeral existence, the traditional people think it more important to write about the legendary and heroic characters. However unimportant one’s own life and the lives of one’s own associates may be, these provide the only authentic window into the life-situations as such. The traditional people therefore achieve in their lives an interesting symbiosis of the temporal and the eternal. By recounting and re-enacting the lives of these heroes, they transform their own life-situations in their light, and they also interpret these heroes in the light of their own experiences. This is how tradition is alive in the lives of people. The traditional artist devotes his entire energy to an aesthetic rendering of eternal myths. The history of Indian art is replete with examples to substantiate this manifestation of the eternal through the temporal. But inasmuch as it is a living tradition, these myths also are relived according to contemporary realities.

Instead of writing about his own experience of conjugal relations, Kalidasa chooses to write about the love of Shiva and Parvati in *Kumarasambhavam*. He lends his own feelings to the love of Shiva and Parvati, and consequently concretizes his own experiences through the paradigm of Shiva and Parvati, Dushyanta and Shakuntala or through the lonely Yaksha of *Meghaduta*, who pines for his beloved and sends her a message through a cloud messenger. In all these works, it is not the feeling of Kalidasa qua Kalidasa, that are rendered but Kalidasa as he becomes a vehicle for engendering these eternal paradigms through various mythical and legendary characters. Similarly, the Bharatnatyam dancer, who renders through mime the childhood pranks of Krishna, recreates and rejuvenates at the same time both the child in her and the vexed mother, and enlivens the life of Krishna through her own gestures and movements.

Undoubtedly, impersonation is a common feature of all dramatic art; but traditional drama essentially rests upon the replay of certain myths or legends. While in traditional drama the actor brings to life a mythical and legendary personage, in non-traditional drama the artist is rendering essentially a fictional situation. In the latter, the actor and the director imbue this imaginary situation with the richness of their own life-experiences; but they do not treat this as an archetype of all lived experiences.

Since impersonation is common to all drama, it is with respect to the art of drama that greater amount of commonality of representation can be discovered between traditional and non-traditional arts. In painting and sculpture it is discernable to a lesser extent. While the non-traditional painter thinks each of his paintings must carry the stamp of his unique style and technique, the

traditional painter sees himself merely as a vehicle through which emerge the eternal forms. This explains why there are hardly any signatures on the ancient Indian paintings. Here the image stands out as an independent entity, while the artist recedes into oblivion. Thus the history of Indian art is an 'art history without names.'<sup>4</sup> It is only in cases where the artists were given awards by the patron kings and this record is kept by chroniclers that the name of the artists are known. For instance, we have the mention of the names of dancers and musicians of the court of Krishnadeva Rai, and of painters and musicians in the reign of Akbar, but we do not know who painted the exclusively carved balustrades of Sanchi stupa, or the frescoes of Ajanta and Bagh. Even though there are no signatures, yet a discerning critic can differentiate between one artist's rendering of a pictorial situation and that of another.

It must be kept in mind that it is in this re-enactment of paradigm that the traditional Indian artist achieves the fulfillment of his creative urge. But, to be sure, 're-enactment' does not mean mechanical repetition. This sense of creativity is quite at variance with our contemporary understanding of the term. We see creativity as intimately related to an affirmation of individuality. And individuality in its contemporary connotation is directly associated with historicity, with temporality as an irreversible sequence. Because of its irreversibility, history carries with it a certain inevitable finitude. Consequently, the only way of grappling with this finitude is to create a unique structure which, in virtue of its matchlessness, stands out in the morass of events and thus transcends temporality. A Van Gogh, despite his finitude, becomes immortal because of his unique style and technique as well as his peculiar choice of images and forms. Contrasted with painters like Van Gogh, there are numerous artists in ancient India and mediaeval Europe who reach timelessness by re-enacting the eternal myths and legends. Through their pictorial rendering of the Crucifixion, the Resurrection or the loves of Radha and Krishna they eternalize their own emotions. Here, their emotions are important, not as expression of historical beings, but as lending life to those legendary emotive experiences.

Consequently, for these artists creativity lies in their transfiguring the eternal into images, in being original in the sense of turning to the original – the primeval. This process continues ceaselessly in the minutest detail of the lives of any traditional people. Even to this day, when traditional values are breaking down, the Hindus re-enact the drama of Rama's life during the festival season, ceremoniously burn Ravana's effigy, and finally celebrate Rama's return to Ayodhya. There are myriad dramatic forms, both classical and folk, which render these legends. However, each region has its own particular manner and style of rendering these legends. The vestiges of this tradition show that art was not a phenomenon of museums and theatres, but was closely connected with the lifestyle of the people. Dramas were enacted to celebrate festivals; dances choreographed and set to music for courts and for ceremonial worship in temples; pictures painted and sculptures hewn to consecrate the temples.

Needless to say that this priority to primordial forms did sometimes result in a mechanical duplication of artifacts based on readymade recipes by mediocre artists. But this fact is often exaggerated by the enthusiasts of novelty in art. Traditional art forms do not set so many stores by novelty and extraordinary creative independence as by a skillful and innovative use of already existing parameters of artistic excellence. This explains that a Bhasa is not creative in the same sense as a Jean Genet, because, while Bhasa is presenting an image of life-situations with the help of legends, Genet does the same with contemporary characters who have no paradigms to live by. They live their existential crisis without having anything to hold on. However, whether one is rendering a timeless legend or a contemporary situation, when one creates a dramatic world, one projects a concrete world of characters that live in the contemporary dramatic time and project towards a future. For instance even if one is writing about the life of Rama, when one visualizes him as a dramatic personage, he will have to be endowed with the flesh and blood of a contemporary individual. This compulsive historicity of the contemporary situation also forces the traditional man to grapple with his situation in a unique manner. Thus, even though a traditional person has a paradigm (or paradigms) to live by, the translation of this paradigm into actual life-situations is no less a creative process than interpreting a *raga* with creative innovations.

Every work of art should be evaluated in terms of the norms of evaluation it has projected through itself. Nevertheless, whatever the norms of interpretation, one criterion must not be violated: a work of art must have a coherence of both form and content. Evidently, form and content cannot be dichotomized, for one completes the other. Without the content form would be unintelligible, and content without form would be unstructured. The distinction is drawn for the purpose of analytical convenience. The internal coherence demands of the artist that he completes his art work in accordance with the initial structure of the image he sets out to concretize. Images, like persons, unfold according to their internal logic. If this logic is contravened, it leads to schizophrenia in persons and to incoherence and confusion in images. As such no artist can afford to ignore the demands of coherence and consistency. For instance, if one rejects realistic perspective, one is committed to treating pictorial space in a manner different from the naturalists' treatment. Cubists should not have used foreshortening in their representation of objects, because they used pictorial space to represent objects from multiple frames of reference – an objective which cannot accommodate the central perspective. Otherwise, the painting would become incoherent and consequently incommunicable. Similarly, since his *Urubhangha* sees the events of *Mahabharata* through the perspective of Duryodhana, Bhasa is committed to viewing the character of Duryodhana with a certain amount of empathy and compassion. His very choice of this vantage point requires him to see Duryodhana, not as a villain, but in his essential humanity, all his foibles and virtues included.

The fact that the traditional artist does not experiment with the vagaries of his whims and fancies does not imply that his work is hackneyed and has no ingeniousness about it. While

analyzing the process of playing a *raga*, Ravi Shankar, the great *sitar* maestro, beautifully highlights the ingeniousness of a classical Indian musician –

“A *raga* is an aesthetic projection of the artist’s inner spirit; it is a representation of his most profound sentiments and sensibilities, set forth through tones and melodies. But the notes of a *raga*, by themselves, have no vitality or force. The musician must breathe life into each *raga*, as he unfolds and expands it. A characteristic of the *raga*, impossible to describe but brought to it by the performing artist, is the *prana* – the life. Through the guidance of the *guru*, and by his own talent and genius, the musician learns how to make the bare notes vibrate, pulsate, come alive.”<sup>5</sup>

Words like *prana* or life are only metaphors, which point to the creative reinterpretation that every musical composition undergoes in the hands of a great virtuoso. It would therefore be unfair to call the life-giving activity a mere craft. This identification of creativity with novelty stems from an obsession with trendiness and experimentation. The fact that one is experimenting with something new does not by itself ensure his being creative. For very often novelty itself becomes an end in itself, and in search of novelty one forgets that art must have a profound meaning which attempts to capture the essentials of human emotivity. It is this and not novelty and experimentalism which enables art to transcend the barriers of space and time. And the fact that Indian artists concretized certain eternal myths in their work is not reason enough to categorize Indian art as spiritual. Nor is their performance of rituals before connecting their works relevant to subsuming art under the rubric of religious activity. For, like any other artist the Indian artist is interested in the sensuous pleasure which these myths generated when transformed into lines, colors, sounds or metric compositions and not in their spiritual or moral dimension. If these works also happened to arouse certain spiritual experiences, it is a contingent matter; because whether the artist is commissioned to sculpt an idol for consecrating in a temple or purely for decoration in a palace, he transcends all these considerations in the moment of creation. While creating the work, all he is interested in is the transfiguration of his imagination into a coherent structure. It is only the beholders who violate the autonomy of an art work by imposing moral and spiritual norms on it. But the artist *qua* artist never questions the autonomy of an art work<sup>6</sup>. He knows that in the act of creation he transcends all extra-aesthetic considerations, whether they are moral or spiritual.

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