

Historicizing Subjectivity in Modernism: Indian and Polish Contexts

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Abstract:

The subjectivity of a modern artist as it was ideated in fin-de-siècle Europe was of a decontextualized creative persona striving to express its innermost feelings. The rationale thus created imbued with a belief in the universality of creative genius in man was successful in maintaining self-perpetuating concepts of international modernism which could perform a decisive role in the transnational and temporal frame work of the discourse on Art. The exclusiveness and elitism with regard to the Euro-centric views felt within this dominant discourse were, however, confuting its rationale. Moreover, the numerous alternative narratives emerged out of the encounter with the project of imperial modernization in the 'underprivileged' regions had their own versions of modernism which had to primarily uphold their national or ethnical loyalties. Large part of art history written in the early twentieth century in these regions can be seen getting to grips with the dilemma of modern artists over reconciling national loyalties and international aspirations. By citing two contexts of India and Poland, one from a former colony of Europe and the other from within Europe, this paper tries to elucidate the formation of subjectivity in modern art.

Keywords: Subjectivity, Modernism, Indian Modern Art, Nationalism, Poland, Historicity

The process of formation of modern agency in colonial India was an infiltration from the premises of building a modern nation state and the political praxis associated with it to the 'lower levels' of everyday life. It is not surprising then that the Indian modern artists of the early twentieth century had to revamp their ancestral glory in order to counter the canons of fine arts postulated by the colonizers. At this point, it is interesting to note that even within Europe the voice of modernism was equivocal; on the one hand supporting its trans-national universal standards and on the other retaining the idea of national specificity. Throughout the nineteenth century the discussions that surrounded Polish art focused on Poland's partition and loss of statehood. Anna Brzyski writes:

The attempts by proponents of modern art to answer these questions- to argue that modernism and patriotism were not necessarily incompatible, and that the adoption of aesthetic standards based on formal principles, rather than narrowly understood national concerns, would allow Polish artists to shed the stigma of parochialism and to compete effectively in the international arena -played a crucial role in turning modernism by the end of 19th century from a marginal to a legitimate, fully mainstream, and institutionally entrenched phenomenon. (Brzyski, 2001:165)

Coming back to the Indian situation, it can be seen that it was not the question of modernism in art per se that the early 'modern' critics tried to address for themselves but was the question of indigenoussness in art.

It was indeed a paradigmatic question as the nationalists involved in Realpolitik were not aware of the methods of capitalist cultural production inherent in imperial colonialism at that time and being modern connoted being 'Victorian' in taste. Ananda Coomaraswami and E.B. Havel, the early exponents of 'indigenouslyness in art' argued against the division of fine arts and crafts proposed in the colonial policy on art. Though Raja Ravi Varma was considered as "the greatest artist of modern India, a nation builder" (Modern Review, 1907), the Bengal school spearheaded by Coomaraswamy and Havel was not sympathetic towards his Victorian sensibility. It was in the works of Abanindranath Tagore that the nationalist sentiment materialized its symbolic structure. Though revived and reimagined Hindu iconography determined a large part of the repertoire of Bengal school artists, their attempts cannot be termed as mere revivalism, as it were. As Wasim Mushtaq Wani puts it:

The shifting positions of revivalist and anti-revivalist stands shared by the artists of Bengal School further enhanced the complexity of the evolution of art. In its early phase the urgency of finding an indigenous alternative to the Victorian academic realism assumed a nationalist "revivalist" tempo, which was subject to serious criticism. And later the students of Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951), the founder of Bengal School, in Santiniketan preferred the immediate and empirical over the historicist oriental sense of Indian modern. (Wani, 2013:1377)

While discussing nationalism and modernism of 19th century Poland Anna Brzyski points out a similar situation. She notes that in the 1870s and 1880s critics began addressing the issue of artists' social and patriotic obligations with increasing frequency. They argued, Anna Brzyski writes, "that works of art could not only satisfy viewers' desire for beauty but also could provide them with moral and patriotic guidance. In particular they could serve as powerful tools of nationalism...By selecting subjects that celebrated the country's past greatness, its unique culture and its landscape, artists could hearten and inspire viewers, appeal to their sense of national pride, and engender in them recognition of their shared national heritage." (Brzyski 2001:167-168)

Viewed from this vantage point, the history of modernism appears to be non-linear rejecting the concepts of linear progression and autonomy of creative genius endorsed by the capitalist mechanism of cultural production. It may be argued that to position modernism as a break in tradition even within Europe is not devoid of problems; let alone in colonial countries. While polemically placing "the when" in the question 'when was modernism in India?' the celebrated art historian Gita Kapur is sure about the absence of avant-garde movements in Indian modernism. She rightly points out that modernism had no firm canonical position in India and that the Indian modern evolved with its own set of canons. At the same time one cannot but notice in her ambitious effort to delineate the contour of Indian modernism what underpins as the nature of modern consciousness is an ahistorical sense of "being able to confront the new without flying to the defense of tradition." (Kapur, 2000:299) She seems to believe in, though within double quotes, an original, correct modernism with its origin in Europe.

I would like to argue at this point that, both within and outside Europe, the subjectivity of a modern artist was a realm of inter and intra subjective interactions with the other. In this sense the emergence of modern consciousness does not certainly ensue in a disjuncture, but one may also think it in terms of a critical retrospection or of being capable to assimilate eclectic resources beyond one's culture. The semiotics of modernism reveals the codes that formed the subjectivity of a modern artist as a third order of signification in the context of two or more confronting sets of codes. My point here is that the context of modernism was a historical juncture, more a temporal than a spatial phenomenon, where two or more cultural codes came face to face.

What happened to the 19th century art writings of Europe is that, as Eleni Gemtou writes “with the appearance of the avant-garde at the end of the 19th century and the promotion of the criterion of artistic newness as a standard of judgment, criticism based upon a historicized approach lost its basis.” (Gemtou, 2010: web) Consider the rejection of perspectival realism by modern artists in Europe; whether it was an exclusive idea bourgeoned within the closed confines of Europe? If it is not, by properly acknowledging the eclectic resources of this idea one may argue that the immediate context of modernism was an opening of windows to the other. In his essay ‘A struggle for modernism’ Sundaram Tagore observes a nonlinear historicity of modernism.

In fact, traditional Indian art possessed the very abstract qualities that Western artists were exulting and borrowing to create their modernist vocabulary. In this circuitous process, modern Indian artists had to relearn the abstract attributes of flat planes, hot colours, and idealized forms, which they had lost after the introduction of academic realism during the colonial period. (Tagore, 1996: 32)

In Piotr Sławski’s opinion, “the western romanticised projection onto the Islamic Orient was reflected in paintings created according to the mimetic approach guided by vanishing point perspective, chiaroscuro modelling, tonality, sfumato, and other artistic schemata aiming at maximal verisimilitude of reality. Their exotic themes, settings and localities, however, were directly appropriated from the Orient.” (Sławski, 2013:18)

Another major influence in western modern art was Japanese art. It was from Japanese art that western modernism learned some new ways of constructing pictorial space, such as aerial perspective, horizontal, vertical and diagonal dimensionality, close-ups, the pars pro toto principle, fortuitous framing, composite formats, crating devices, truncation of objects, spatial divisions, and unorthodox formats. (Ibid: 87-88)

In this context it is important to note that ‘the other’ in the dominant discourse of Europe was not the Oriental other alone. There was an ideological bisection within Europe which excluded Eastern Europe from Europe. This is how the 18th century traveller Count Louis-Philippe de Ségur from France describes his experience in Poland:

In traversing the eastern part of the estates of the King of Prussia, it seems that one leaves the theatre where there reigns a nature embellished by the efforts of art and perfected civilization. The eye is already saddened by arid sands, by vast forests. But when one enters Poland, one believes one has left Europe entirely, and the gaze is struck by a new spectacle: an immense country almost totally covered with fir trees always green, but always sad, interrupted at long intervals by some cultivated plains, like islands scattered on the ocean; a poor population, enslaved; dirty villages, cottages little different from savage huts; everything makes one think one has been moved back ten centuries, and that one finds oneself amid hordes of Huns, Scythians, Veneti, Slavs, and Sarmatians. (apud Sławski: 19-20)

Until as late as 1918 Poland was “the Orient of Europe” (Sławski). The otherness felt by Western Europe, however, was not entirely unreasonable. Sławski writes:

Not only was Poland an object of Orientalisation or demi-Orientalisation imposed by Western European powers, but it also out of its own accord adopted cultural practices that collectively can be gathered under the rubric of self-Orientalisation. Like the majority of cultural and artistic movements and trends, the Enlightenment fashion for the Orient reached Poland from Western Europe, but this strand of the fashion for the Orient proved a rather superficial addition to a much more profound oriental presence deeply rooted in

Polish cultural consciousness since the late Middle Ages. Conditioned by Poland's geographical location in the east of Europe, it comes as no surprise that Poles had been in a more direct contact with the peoples of Asia. Starting with the Mongol expeditions of the 13th century, Poland experienced numerous and diverse injections of oriental presence. This cultural influx was anything but ephemeral. Consecutive arrivals found favourable conditions to coexist alongside the Poles and were often integrated into the Polish society, enabling for aspects of their culture and art to permeate into Polish culture. (Splawski: 21)

Though there are several other areas that constitute the ideological framework of modernism and beg further investigation one may assume from these examples the emergence of modern consciousness to be a moment of imaging the self in the mirror of the other which reflects an absence/anticipation or difference. The subjectivity of a modern artist, thus formed owed much to negotiations, and contestations with others with whom it was connected. Thus within the temporal framework of modernism emerged many modernisms with regional specificity defying the notion of the original. To conclude, let me quote Erin Fitz-Henry:

To understand human subjectivity, (then), we cannot simply resort to a biologically grounded universal human nature or take refuge in abstract, ahistorical ethical discourse; we need to affirm the variability, heterogeneity, and contingency of our subjectivities as they unfold within the realm of experience. (Fitz-Henry, 2007:53)

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