

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE SUBLIME IN ART

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INTRODUCTION

The human world today is very much sophisticated as well as enterprising. Cut-throat competition is its watch word for survival and development. Thoughts, feelings and imagination of the human beings are very much locked up. Their hearts and minds are caught up in various life-constraints. The human spirit is highly confined to material and temporary pre-occupations. There is hardly any leisure or mood left for penetrating into the wonders of the world. The mysterious elements of nature like sky, clouds, springs, streams, rivers, waterfalls, flowers, grass and vegetation as well as the living beings like insects, birds, fishes and animals have very little appeal. The humans seem to have lost the sense of surprise, wonder, beauty, appreciation, enjoyment and ecstasy in the ordinary elements of nature and life!

In this predicament, how could the alluring, multifarious and inexhaustible beauty of nature once again inspire and awaken the slumbersome spirit of the humans?. How could their hearts and minds be re-charged with a sense of beauty, aesthetic vision and spiritual energy, which is capable of re-creating the nature and the human nature through art forms? How could the life-generating experience of the sublime in art vibrate the human energies unto a worth-while existence in this world? What does art mean? What are the implications of the sublime? What are the dimensions of the experience of the Sublime in art? These questions explain the following endeavour.

ART

MEANING ‘*Kala*’, the word for art in Hindi, has ‘*kal*’ as the root, which means ‘*chalna*’ ‘*gati*’ ‘*spandan*’ etc., i.e., movement, way, vibration, pulsation, etc. It sprouts from personal taste and takes shape in imagination. It proceeds into co-ordination, arrangement and order, providing meaning and beauty. It is the creation or expression of what is beautiful. As a special work or action, it is an accomplishment or an achievement, in the true sense of the word. Basically, it is a creative and intuitive imitation of nature. Fine arts like drawing, painting, sculpture, music, dance, ballet etc., are its forms.

ART IS ONENESS It searches for oneness in the many forms. To find speciality in generality and to celebrate harmony and balance in various factors is the way of art.

Recognising unity in diversity and establishing uniqueness in pluriformity is its style. It discerns value in the diverse components of life. A sense of value in utility is civilisation; a sense of value in civilisation is beauty; a sense of value in beauty is art; a sense of value in art is human culture and a sense of value in human culture is spirituality. Thus art is a journey from utility to spirituality, with an experience of totality and unity.

ART IS FOR ALL In general, all are oriented to it. The inclination of art is the natural form of the humans. It is the natural heredity of the humanity. It covers the whole of life to the details. It entertains, enriches and helps flourish the human life. It prompts self-encounter and thus re-creates the human life. It is a multi-dimensional activity of the humans: volitional, intellectual, emotional, imaginal and spiritual. Art is a comprehensive endeavour of the human person.

ART IS AN IMPRESSION AND AN EXPRESSION AT THE SAME TIME As impression it is a strong influence. It is an effect produced on the mind or feelings; it is a deep fixing in the memory. Impression is that by which one is able to catch and recognize art and to celebrate joy in it. On the other hand, as expression it is a process of making known or communicating one's thoughts or feelings by words, looks, gestures, actions etc. The greatest art historian and critic Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy says, "in making a thing the very innermost self of man comes into outwardness"ⁱ. It's a process, it is an effort; it is a skill; it is a craft--all in one. According to Meister Eckhart, art is a three-fold process: "the rising of the idea in germ, its taking shape before the mind's eye, and outward expression in work"ⁱⁱ. Impression is the internal aspect of art and expression is the external aspect of the same. The former is the seed and the latter is the fruit. The first is the foundation and the second is the building. Thus these two dimensions of art are complementary to each other and together they make a complete concept of art.

ART IS AN EXPERIENCE Experience is an event that affects one, in more or less degrees. It is original in either way – getting in touch with the origins or roots as well as becoming new and renewing. It is seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and doing for oneself in art. It is personal knowledge gained by one's skill. Borrowed experience cannot have access to art; it is experience of oneself. Experience of art is getting across to the 'sahaj', the 'swabhav', the 'swaroop'. The 'sahaj' is that which comes easily; it is spontaneous and simple. The 'swabhav' is that which is born with, that which is always with; it is natural, innate and owned by disposition. The 'swaroop' is the true form, the real, the good, and the beautiful. It is the "Satyam', Shivam, and Sundaram' i.e. the Truth, the Good and the Bliss. Art experience introduces one to the fine, the deep and the interior. That underlines the personal dimension of art. Deep subjective involvement and genuine participation is the essential nature of art. As a

creative energy it is always an awakening experience, because it introduces one to the direct encounter of the Sublime.

THE SUBLIME

MEANING The Sublime is that which is of the greatest and the highest sort. It causes wonder or surprise. It is that which fills one with fear and awe. It elicits regard, reverence and devotion. It is beautiful and noble. It is ideal, qualitative, pure, lofty, magnanimous, generous and broad-minded. It is that which is farther, best, excellent and outstanding. It is exquisite, exalted and refined. It is a feel of the splendour, magnificence and grandeur. It is a glimpse of a miracle, elevation and unsurpassability. It is remarkable, supernatural, divine and mysterious in quality. It is the essence of beauty. Thus the Sublime is an indescribable experience of the 'great'.

To become great is an inborn tendency. The extra-ordinary attracts attention. The 'great' is considered worthy of respect, regard, worship and appreciation. Orientation to the 'great' is one of the basic inclinations of the human mind. Hence the greatness of the 'great' reflected in art needs to be recognised and accepted. The feel of the splendid commands respectability. "The Sublime, thus, is the effect of the experience of the 'great'. This is a fundamental truth of art and of life, at the same time"ⁱⁱⁱ.

THE ELIGIBILITY FOR THE SUBLIME The Sublime needs to be deserved. The pre-requisite for the same is a healthy mind, which would make a healthy art experience possible. A sick mind cannot relish the sweetness of beauty. Negative energy would lead one to bondages, conflicts and struggles. One who is self-centred, jealous, malicious, rigid, hardened, frustrated, dull and stupefied is not worthy of approaching art. Positive energies and qualities give one an orientation for the Sublime. Qualities like delightfulness, a sense of wonder, optimism, generosity, softness, melodiousness, sweetness, fineness etc. coupled with a genuine search and acceptance of the 'great' ensure joy and bliss, and an ensuing feel of the Sublime. The ego needs to be emptied and from that vacuum the taste of serenity and happiness is to be drawn. A humble heart is to be consciously maintained. Only then intense and real experience of the Sublime is possible. That is to say, positive qualities are the natural need of the human mind and it is this orientation which determines the criteria for one's eligibility for the experience of the sublime in art as well as in life.

DIMENSIONS OF THE SUBLIME

THE SUBLIME IS A CULTURAL EXPERIENCE Culture springs out of the inner recesses of the human being. Art comes forth, too, from the interior world in a creative net-work of expression. Culture is a sense of value; it is a way of finding everlasting

value in the elements of life. Art makes a decisive dipping into oneself. A growing perception of the unity of life is the natural outcome. This fundamental value deepens one's consciousness. The deeper the value-consciousness, the deeper is the rate of growth in the quality of culture, too. The depth, consciousness and quality thus jointly obtained is an artistic merit; it is a cultural achievement, as well. Culture is the religion of the humanity. This universal perspective together with the value-consciousness elevates one to the rich and life-nourishing experience of the human culture. Culture is the basic form of beauty the human live by. This sense of beauty is the basic concern of art. Art and culture belong to each other; they are part of each other. The artistic purification and cultural cultivation are a joint process. The artistic sublime is accomplished in cultural enterprises.

THE SUBLIME IS AN AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE Appreciation of the beautiful is the door to the Sublime. Capacity for perceiving, understanding and loving what is beautiful, especially in the art forms, only can place claim for a feel of the Sublime. The taste for beauty brings an enjoyment of the art. "The enjoyment of the work of art, admittedly is its ultimate value"^{iv}. The ultimate value of the enjoyment takes the art experience to the spiritual realm. "Aesthetic experience is thus declared to be an inscrutable and uncaused spiritual activity, that is virtually ever-present and potentially realizable"^v. The spiritual activity initiated by art highlights the presence of the Sublime. Euri Borev presents a sociological perspective of the aesthetic experience: "The infinity and eternity of the word, the enormous inner power of nature and man, unlimited prospects for the exploitation of nature and its humanism—all this is manifestation of the Sublime as a category of aesthetics"^{vi}. Aesthetic experience raises the human heart to a level as high as the 'great'.

THE SUBLIME IS A LIBERATIVE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE The phenomenon of religion is inevitably related to art, not only by way of its destination but its process, too. Religion is a socio-cultural conditioning as well as a psycho-spiritual setting. With its individual and community aspects, it has a primordial experience which serves as the pivot of the faith of all those who are bound by that source. The fundamental experience continues to communicate to the successive generations of humankind, a way of liberating oneself from the bondages of life. "The cord of any religion is the liberative experience"^{vii}. The function of religion is to make salvation available to its members. Salvation is going beyond oneself. It is a "self-transcending event that radiantly transform the human person affected by that experience"^{viii}. This process of transformation is a leap into a contemplative calm in order to appropriate the Sublime. Similarly art, as an intuitive energy, is process of penetrating in to the ultimate source, degree by degree, through freeing oneself from bondages, self transcending and transformation, till it comprehends the Sublime. Thus, the experience of the Sublime becomes a process of religious liberation, by way of always going

beyond, along the artistic channel. That is why Ananda Kentish Coormaraswamy categorically states, “ Art is religion, religion is art, not related, but the same”^{ix}.

THE SUBLIME IS A SYMBOLIC EXPRESSION An expression implies, suggests and states something, clearly and definitely. It makes known and shows by words, looks or actions. As a linguistic endeavor it is communicating the thoughts or feelings through words, gestures etc.” In human consciousness language plays a decisive role”^x. When emotional experience is expressed it is always symbolic and stylistic. Signs, designs, figures, marks etc are required in representing the experience. The literary and artistic dynamism stands ready for the inner dialogue with the Sublime. The faculties of sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell are closely involved in it. Careful seeing and listening are fundamentally complementary to the process of expression, especially in the case of words or signs. “While words are signs of things, they can also be heard or read as symbols of what these things themselves imply”^{xi}. Thus the experience of the Sublime overflows into a meaningful expression, making the art experiment highly rewarding.

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE SUBLIME IS A PROCESS OF SUBLIMATION Sublimation has the concept of conversion at its basis. Causing change in the instinctual and emotional ways of the humans unto higher forms of experience and expression is its internal operation. Channelizing the natural inclinations towards nobler and refined levels would necessitate a continuous act of purification, prior to the act of refinement. That is to say, sublimation converts the quality and nature of the experience for the better. The inner dynamics of transformation is the genius of the art forms. The human instincts and emotions undergo significant change in art. Fear, for example, is the most basic instinct in a living being. The basis of fear is the experience of one’s smallness. This causes a sense of insecurity. In the humans the instinct of fear can be transformed into a sense of awe, as if for the Himalayam mountain or sea, into a sense of respect and regard for the great or magnificent and into a sense of reverence and devotion for the tremendous and mysterious power of he Creator. Thus the unpleasant instinct of fear becomes a pleasant, comfortable and enjoyable experience. This qualitative change in the very nature of the emotion assures an encounter with the Sublime. Such a process is sublimation and it is made possible and effectively facilitated by art forms.

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE SUBLIME IS LIKE A TRANCE Trance is a dream world for the artist. It’s a deeply affected state. This state is highly charged by the creative energy of art. ‘While creating, the creator/artist/poet/thinker, by the strength of his/her original calibre, reaches a state of trance; he/she encounters a new consciousness; new sentiments and imaginations are awakened; new designs arise. He /She is taken into a world of surprise and joy’^{xii}. This trance is an experience of

brightness, of special light, of glittering. The brightness takes the artist to a higher plane. The glow reflected on the face of the artists, poets, dancers, musician's etc while performing is because of this trance experience. They seem to be self-forgetful, lost and immersed; they are definitely beyond the reach of the ordinary. This artistic trance is a unifying experience. There is a high degree of concentration, which seems to gather the parts into a single whole. Such a wholistic and integrating experience is the energising factor of the trance in art, with a sure accomplishment of the Sublime.

THE SUBLIME IS THE SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE As the experience goes to the depth of the mind and body, the Eternal, the Unlimited, is encountered. In this encounter the divine is born. The magnitude, the brilliance, and the quality of the heavenly celestial are felt. The divine presence becomes a spiritual consciousness of knowledge, wisdom, enlightenment and awakening. The artist feels that 'I am in the divine and the divine is in me'. The consciousness transcends the limits and spreads all over. It rises up to the ideal; it gets purveyed; it passes over from untruth to truth, from darkness to light, from death to life, from evil to good, from disorder to order, from disharmony to harmony, and thus to beauty. The beautiful is the realm of revelation. Revelation sharpens the consciousness. This experience of the consciousness is a spirit centred process of inspiration. This unfathomable spring of inspiration in art evidences the experience of the Sublime. Art, thus, is an unparalleled spirituality.

THE SUBLIME IS A MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE Art enables the artist to encounter the mystery. The encounter awakens curiosity and interest to search. The search into the cave of one's heart continues till the sight of the Magnificent is achieved. This curious and untiring search is not only an attempt to grasp the knowledge and the knowable but is a peep into the unknown and the unknowable. Mystery is co-born of the humans. It is an innate companion. It challenges the human mind and awakens inspiration. There arises an ear for the unheard melody. Mystical experience is the continuous communication with the Sublime. It ensures unending spiritual insights and immense divine power. Art always envisages mystery in its creations and the experience of the Sublime becomes ever a mystical reality.

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE SUBLIME IS A JOURNEY TOWARDS PERFECTION

Perfection is the state of being complete. Completion is having everything needed. It is the highest point in anything. It is the best in quality. The attainment of perfection in the superlative sense does not seem possible in this world. But attempting the highest perfection is the essential spirit of art; that is the genius of art. Thus we can say, encountering the Sublime itself is perfection. But then, it is not a static achievement. It is a dynamic event. It takes place in the going, in the doing. It is the very process of

life; it is the journey of life. That is what is meant when said, ‘all things tend toward their ultimate perfection’^{xiii}. A sense of perfection means full involvement, deep commitment, honest engagement and the best possible attainment. Meister Eckhart says, “to work according to the ‘dearest conception of his art’ (97), that is with all the skill and care he can command, is merely honest, and ‘by honest I mean doing one’s best at the moment’ (II, 95), having ‘good grounds for thinking no one else could do the work as well’ (II, 90), and standing for ‘perfection in temporal works’ (II,92), the ‘careful’ being ‘those who let nothing hinder them in their work’ (II 90)”^{xiv}. That would mean that the provisions for the journey of perfection is doing one’s best at the given time and in the given situation, honestly and committedly that is why Jesus says, ‘love with your whole heart, whole mind, whole spirit and whole strength God, and neighbour as well’ (Wald Bulke, The Pavitr Bible (Hindi), Mt 22.33-39, Satprakashan, Indore, 1990, 39). This qualitative outlook of perfection illumines one’s heart, mind and spirit. Such illumination accelerates the experience of e Sublime. This ever-inventive approach of art, exceptionally so, is the perfection of the Sublime.

THE SUBLIME IS ‘ BRAHMA SWAD SAHODAR’ The Sublime gives a heavenly flavour, which suggest a common origin with Brahma, the Creator Himself. In other words, it is a delightful experience, of the level of divine right. This is an eternal delight a great pleasure. It is the third of the three divine attributes, called Beauty or Bliss, the other two being Truth and Good. Since the divine is a mystery, the experience of the Sublime is a mysterious enjoyment, too. Relishing the blissful and the mysterious Spirit is a perennial source of sweetness. This personal experience of the Sublime generates immeasurable spiritual energy. Kabir expresses this unique state of the human spirit in terms of love: “Akath kehane prem kee, kachoo kehee na jayi; goonge keru sarkara baithe baithe muskai”^{xv}. The story of love cannot be described; nothing can be said about to express it. it is like a dumb person who after having eaten jaggy smiles; he is not able to express the sweet taste he feels. The divine Bliss experience of the Sublime is likewise. Again, “Paar Brahm ke tej kaa kaisa hai unman, kahibe koo sobha neheen, dekhyaa hee parvan”^{xvi}. The experience of the Blissful Sublime is purely a matter of the inner forum of art. One’s heart is the witness of the ‘greatness’ encountered and experienced in art. The story of the experience of the Sublime in art, thus, is purely personal and beautiful beyond description.

CONCLUSION

Nature is an unsurpassable reservoir of fascinating series of lines, colours, designs, arrangements, shapes, forms, sounds, rhythms, speeds, movements, fragrance, tastes and touches. These rich and diverse dimensions of the creation draw a captivating rainbow of beauty. The layers of this beauty are unending sources of indescribable joy. Thus the nature mirrors a spectacular sight of the Magnificent, the Eternal.

Art produces another world of beauty, subsisting on the close observation, inventive imagination and continuous experience of the living nature. This process of re-creating the nature reflects forth an aesthetic culture. A fine sense of value in life is its genius. Art impresses and expresses perennial cultural values and thus enlightens and brightens the life of the human beings. When the range of transformation of the human nature in art reaches as high as encountering the Eternal Spirit, the Sublime comes to the experiential lime-light as its culmination. This experience of the Sublime is the pivotal reality of life --general as well as aesthetic spiritual with its depth and height in constant dialogue with each other.

The experience of the 'Great ' is the extreme destination of the human creation. The supreme form of creation is found in artistic activity. The expression of the 'Great' is the true form of the Sublime. The creative encounter and experience of the Sublime is the genius of art, making it fully relevant. The experience of the Sublime in art, with its aesthetic and spiritual energies, blesses the humans with a 'relish' of the divine-- par excellence.

NOTES

1. Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, 1974 the Transformation of Nature in Art, New Delhi: Munshiram Manohartal Publishers, Pvt. Ltd, 72.
2. Quoted in *ibid*, 77
3. Dr Hardwari Lal Sharma, Kala mein Sangeet, Sahity aur Udat ke Tatv, Mansi Prakashan, Meerut, 1995,72
4. Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, The Transformaton of Nature in Art, 66
5. *Ibid*, 51
6. Quoted in Dr Hardwari Lal Sharma, Kala mein Sangeet, Sahity aur Udat ke Tatv, 84
7. Aloysius Pierris, Love meets Wisdom, Orbit Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1990, 110
8. *Ibid*, 111
9. Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, The Transformation of Nature in Art, 62
10. Dr Hemchandra Pandey, Bhaasha, Mastishk aur Chetna, Swati Publications, Delhi 1990, 27
11. Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, Figures of Speech or Figures of Thought, Munshriam Manoharala Publishers Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi, 1981, 111

12. Dr Hardwari Lal Sharma, Kala mein Sangeet, Sahity aur Udat ke Tatv, 61-62
 13. Quoted in Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, The Transformation of Nature in Art, 94
 14. Quoted in Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, The Transformation of Nature in Art, 89-90
 15. Dr Jaydev Singh and Dr Vasudev Singh, Kabir Vangmay, Part II, Sabad I, Page 1
 16. Shyam Sunder Das (Ed.), Kabir Granthavali, Nagri Pracharini Sabha, Varanasi, Vikramvin Samvat 2045, Sakhee5.3, page 10
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