

Contemporary Nepali Arts: Some Shocking Trends

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Abstract: In contemporary Nepali arts, there are some trends that shock any sensible viewer or any informed person in the area. Some artists repeat the same subject matter, figure and technique throughout their life or from the beginning of their profession till now. The presentation of the same thing all the time creates monotony and nausea in the viewers. The question arises: how can an artist do the same thing all the time? Some artists see the works of famous western artists in art history books, art magazines and the world wide web, and they copy their subject matters and techniques thinking that they can create works and be famous. Some artists randomly splash and pour colors on the canvas and say that the mess and confusion in the canvas is abstract art. They opine that nobody can understand abstract art. They are fooling the viewers. Some artists call themselves modern Nepali artists, for they have practiced modern techniques of western arts. Some artists print the photograph on the canvas, make the photograph rough using paints and call it their paintings thinking that the viewers will be fooled. Some artists do realistic paintings with sweats and tireless efforts to earn their livelihood but when it comes to the exhibition of artworks, they make abstract paintings in few minutes. We can find such naïve and shocking trends in some senior artists as well, and young artists following their footprints. As a result, a substantial portion of Nepali art has already entered the whirlpool presenting its non-existent situation which demands immediate rescue from real artists and intellectuals. The scenario of art can be an analogy of the social and political situation of Nepal. We talk about great revolutions, changes and achievements but the situation of people is getting worse and civilization has been degenerated.

Keywords: Imitation, abstract art, modern artist, analogy, political situation

Introduction

Contemporary Nepali arts reject the tradition and follow western techniques of art like impressionist techniques, fauvist, expressionist, cubist, Dadaist, abstractionist, surrealist, abstract expressionist and minimalist techniques. Artists follow western trends and techniques (Bhattarai, 2057 B.S.). They say that by following western techniques, they become modern. Their opinion is western arts are modern arts. They want to be modern, so they follow western techniques. The books of history of art have been filled with the paintings and sculptures of western artists like Manet, Monet, Vincent van Gogh, Paul Cezanne, Paul Gauguin, Edvard Munch, Rodin, Brancusi, Matisse, Emil Nolde, Braque, Pablo Picasso, Kandinsky, Salvador Dali, Jackson Pollock, de Kooning, Rothko and so on. They are great artists, and their works are great. They are famous artists, and their works are famous. Their works are modern arts. Nepali artists also want to be modern, famous and great. So, they follow these great artists. But unfortunately, contemporary Nepali artists who follow western artists cannot become great and famous (Sharma, 2019). Instead, they are blamed as imitating others, copying others and plagiarizing. Every day, we are becoming more modern, but we are moving in the circle; the faster we move the earlier we reach the same point. Being so-called modern, we have been nobody and we have reached nowhere. We do not want to be ourselves. We want to be modern like others. We are busy and crazy to be somebody else. But we ignore the effects of such attitudes and actions.

We can link this situation of Nepali art to other domains like education, society and politics. English is the measuring rod of our education. We give value to the books written in English. Moreover, citing the books written by foreign writers, especially, by Europeans and Americans, is considered better. Our constitution is as good as the constitution of the United Kingdom. Some political leaders state that they want to make Nepal like Switzerland. Some want to make Nepal like Singapore. I am surprised why they do not try to make our country like Nepal. We see other's big buildings and luxury, and we want similar things. Though one cannot achieve that luxury, s/he attempts to walk on the marble floor or red carpet in the form of a slave and imagines having been the boss or master. We are unable to be the leader but pretend to be one. This is so in almost all the fields. Most of us are driven by our imagined hunger even if we have eaten enough, and there is still a surplus for us. The hunger is so deep that we are not satisfied until our stomachs are burst out. We focus on accumulation by hook or by crook. We do not have faith in sincerity, integrity and hard work but we need quick money from under the table. We enjoy being a middleman and taking a commission. Ten years ago, such a situation was rare in remote villages, but the pandemic of corruption and commission has been disseminated throughout the rural area. Fewer people work and more people need profit. The question arises: is it sustainable? We can see a parallel situation in art, culture, education and politics.

The trends of taking western techniques began at the beginning of the Rana regime with the then prime minister Jung Bahadur Rana's Visit to Europe along with Nepali artist Bhajuman Chitrakar (Sharma, 2014). The ruler and the artist were exposed to western realistic techniques and fascinated by the works. The rulers encouraged the artists to get their portraits made in realistic representation with appropriate use of linear

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perspective, proportion, light and shade. During the period of the Rana rule, portrait painting reached its climax since the rulers loved to see their own images in paintings and sculptures. The western influence became more intense after the fall of the Ranas and the rise of the democratic system in 1950. Mishra (2045 B.S.) describes the scenario of that time:

After 1950 the political environment for the development of art gradually turned out to be conducive. Some young painters publicly appeared with a new strategy towards breaking through the rigid tradition and tried to establish their own identity in art by supplementing new dimensions in their lines, forms, shapes and colors. One could easily visualize the parallel development of traditional and contemporary art, nevertheless, artists of the young generation were growing more inquisitive for discovering something heartily acceptable for them in the western method. The transition of young artists from tradition to modernity was taking a fast stride in the early period of democratic atmosphere of Nepal. (p.20)

Manuj Babu Mishra also accepts that western influence contributed to bringing modernity to Nepali art. The view is widespread in the domain of Nepali art which is questionable, for following the west is not modern. The democratic atmosphere after the mid-twentieth century facilitated the entry of contemporary western forms, which brought tangible changes in the domain of Nepali art. Nepali artists "fully used the techniques and media now universally recognized as occidental" (Subedi, 1992, p.124).

In terms of techniques and forms, it is difficult to show differences in Nepali paintings and western paintings except the latter are more aesthetic. The question is: in such different geography, culture and context, how do the artworks happen to be similar? Nepali artists are influenced by western forms and techniques. In the west, these techniques were used with certain significance but in Nepal, they appear on the surface without significant substance. This does not seem to be art but only pretending of it. An art critic of *The Indian Express* comments on the paintings of Nepali artists around 1973:

In the history of modern painting, impressionism and expressionism are inalienably associated with the European experience of industrialization and technicised lifestyle. The movements, when transformed into modern idioms of visual expression and used by painters in other parts of the globe where the social history has had a different run, tend to betray a confused pattern of imagery and execution. Contemporary Nepalese paintings, now on view at the Shridha Fami art Gallery, have this contradiction. Most of the abstract expressionist paintings are confused (qtd. in Singh, 2035 B.S., p.66).

There is dilemma and confusion in the paintings. There is a natural attraction to a new thing but there is no idea what to do with it. We found the new cloth and put it on in an inappropriate place. To the naïve and ignorant person, it is entertaining but to the informed one, it is a pathetic experience. This is the celebration of annihilation. This research attempts to show the western influence on Nepali arts and the significance of the influence.

Research Methodology

The area of this study is contemporary Nepali art which has been explored by tracing the alien influences in the native compositions. The research is qualitative in the sense that the analysis and interpretation of the works by different critics in different times and places can bring different discourse. Books on the history of art, journal, magazine and newspaper articles and critiques on exhibition catalog are the secondary sources that have been used to create a background of the study. Works of art are the primary sources that have been analyzed and interpreted. Telephone interviews have been conducted with artists and art critics.

Is it art? Or drama of art?

While looking at some contemporary Nepali arts, viewers praise them as the people praised the naked emperor in a folk tale. When we view them closely, they look like arts since the artists use canvas and colors, and they do not have a pragmatic purpose but they neither give aesthetic pleasure nor teach any lesson. Furthermore, they seem to be stale since those colors and forms were already seen in the books of the history of art. There is much ado about nothing. There is an explosion of the verbal voice of praise and the statements of dedication in art but signifies nothing. We have seen the heroes in the film and imitate their hairstyle and fashion but doing this we cannot be the hero. The same is the situation in politics.

Nepali art is the analogy of Nepali politics. We have seven revolutions, many constitutions, many leaders and many political parties. Our constitution is as good as the constitution of the United Kingdom (UK) and India. The leaders say they are fighting for people in the revolution but when the opportunity comes, the leaders provide the public posts to their wife, girlfriend, son, daughter, brother-in-law, sister-in-law, son-in-law and daughter-in-law. Thus, it is not democracy but oligarchy under the surface. Now, you yourself see the contemporary situation and say: is it politics? Or acting of politics? The same thing has been reflected in all the state mechanisms from the top to the grassroots. The public servant pretends to be the master of people. Colors are randomly splashed on the canvas and sold to the people. The mafia caters sweet words, rice and meat to the people and wins their votes, terrorizes them and extorts them through hospitals, schools and building contracts. Furthermore, such mafia feeds the so-called leaders, as a result, the minister becomes the puppet of criminals. In such a situation, do you expect respect, health, good education and security? The security force itself has ironically been the threat. The hospital itself eagerly sends the people to hell. There is a distance between appearance and reality. The acting of politics

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and art is done just to cheat the viewers and people. Upreti (2007) points out the responses of Nepali artists toward western forms:

It seems possible to argue that while in some cases the forms of western modernity were imitated or copied, in some other instances they were rejected as the non-western societies sought to protect the forms of their own indigenous traditions. In addition to these two cultural responses of mimicry and indigenization, a third alternative was also possible. This consisted in a selective appropriation of the forms of both western modernity and native traditions in a production of what might be called hybrid forms in the areas of music, economy, painting and literature among others. (p.22)

Despite the fact that Upreti shows three types of responses, the first one seems to be dominant in the context of Nepali art. To make ourselves modern, we have imitated or copied western form.

By doing plagiarism, we do not respect the great artists, we underestimate our viewers, and ultimately, by investing our valuable time, we are cheating ourselves. In this context, Pandey (2046 B.S.) has such view:

Although the paintings of Nepal are not distinctly different from such arts in other countries, some of the contemporary artists are successful in evolving their styles by a selection of symbols and abstract forms. However, the paintings exhibited in the recent international exhibitions present the glimpses of the contemporary art development in Nepal. Artists have not developed their own styles and in the selection of motifs in the contemporary arts, the artists do not use native subjects on a large scale. As such very few artists influenced by western styles and colours are successful in giving Nepalese touch and identity in their works while most artists share the same features as any artists of the globe. (p.41)

Subedi (2005) states that the relationship of Nepali art and western form is "problematic" (p.117). The westernization of Nepali art makes a departure for Nepali artists. "Their 'modern' is basically a western concept" (Subedi, 1992, p.123). Is this western concept of modernity harmonious in Nepali context? The west has achieved the height of industrialism and information technology, but we call ourselves an agrarian society but import most of the food we eat. Is it possible to be modern and postmodern in art but primitive in real life? The critics and artists of some western countries are talking about the terms 'modern' and 'postmodern', they sound beautiful for us and we use them like putting others' dresses on our bodies. Hegewald (1996) states that "good" Nepali art is "influenced by new and foreign ideas", and it is considered to be true modern Nepali art (100). Such comments and criticisms on Nepali arts contributed to neglect tradition and to follow the footprints of the west.

According to Antonia Neubauer (nd), Lain Bangdel painted images in an international style- a special blend of western techniques learned in London, Paris and America, and Indian traditional line drawings and religious representations. Bangdel's paintings present the influence of many western techniques. His early figurative works and their color scheme, which depict sadness, poignancy and loneliness, echo Picasso's paintings of the blue period (Singh, 1976, p.237). His later works were influenced by Gauguin, Cezanne and van Gogh's post-impressionism, Braque's cubism, Kandinsky's abstraction, and Pollock, Rothko and de Kooning's abstract expressionism (Bangdel, nd, p.12-16). Dina Bangdel further writes on Bangdel's paintings:

One finds in many of these works the undeniable influence of the elongated rhythms of Modigliani's works, the quite vigor and laborious sobriety of Braque as well as the balance and force of Gauguin's colors. As experimental works, Bangdel considered these influences necessary and helpful in grasping the technique to master the oil medium. (p.12)

Dina Bangdel is the daughter of Lain Singh Bangdel. The above lines depict that Bangdel has been influenced by the works of famous western artists. In the west, many trends, techniques and movements of art came gradually one after the other, but Bangdel and some other Nepali artists have taken all the available techniques at a point of time. About the impact of the exhibition of Bangdel's paintings in contemporary Nepali art Abhi Subedi (1992) remarks:

The exhibition of Bangdel's paintings in the oldest college gallery in Kathmandu in 1962 marks the turning point in the history of Nepali art. It is perhaps the beginning of the contemporary or modern period of Nepali paintings.

The cultural basis of the subcontinental and Nepali art saw a new configuration of emulation which was new, alien, complex and challenging. But in the abstract canvas, the viewers of Kathmandu saw a possibility, and hope for freedom and expression, since for the first time in a painting many Nepali viewers saw a unique presentation of human drama (p.123-24).

According to Subedi, western influence appears to bring a drastic change in the domain of Nepali art but the question arises whether the change is for better or worse.

Gehendraman Amatya is another artist who has a similar pattern to that of Bangdel in terms of western influence. Rajan Karki says that Amatya is a "leading figure among the modern Nepalese painters representing the abstract school of Modern Painting" (qtd. in Amatya, 2061 B.S., p.32). Amatya claims that he is the first Nepali artist who created and exhibited modern paintings. In the exhibition catalog of his works, Amatya (2062 B.S.) writes about himself: "Today we are celebrating Golden Jubilee of the first man show painting exhibition of Modern Art in the history of Nepal. The Modern period in Nepalese Art may be said the date from the year 1955 when my first one-man show of Modern painting exhibition was held in Nepal" (exhibition catalog). According

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to Amatyia, the term 'modern' means 'abstract'. At that time, abstract art was almost 50 years old in the west, and other many art movements had taken place since then. Narendra Raj Prasai also accepts Amatyia's view in these words: "The first man to hold an exhibition of modern art was Gehendra Man Amatyia. He has held a solo art exhibition in 1955" (qtd. in Amatyia, 2061 B.S., p.30). Regarding the influence of western art forms, Amatyia insists that he has been practicing almost all the modern techniques of painting. These expressions convey that bringing the western techniques and practicing abstract art is a matter of prestige; following the west enhances your status.

Similar trends can be seen in other Nepali artists as well. Shankar Raj Singh Suwal's paintings have been influenced by the works of van Gogh, Cezanne, Salvador Dali and Picasso (Mainali, 2053 B.S., p.100). In an exhibition catalog of Shyamlal Shrestha works, Subedi (1996) says that in "abstract forms he has created human drama through the dominant use of cubes and tiles created by large brushstrokes that move up and down the canvas by forming invisible lines" (exhibition catalog). The cubes in Shrestha's paintings resemble Pablo Picasso's cubist forms. Similarly, Shashikala Tiwari paintings are influenced by the works of Picasso's cubism and Cezanne's post-impressionism (Mainali, 2053 B.S. p.105). Most of her paintings are created in cubist style using oil color (Singh, 1976, p.278).

Several western forms like Emil Nolde's expressionist forms, Willem de Kooning's abstract expressionism, Pablo Picasso and Braque's collage and Matisse's abstractions influence Kiran Manandhar's paintings. Regarding the influence of other artists in his works, Manandhar (2006) himself agrees, "I adore the artists like Willem de Kooning, Emile Nolde, Pablo Picasso, Braque, Matisse, Uttam Nepali and Laxman Shrestha whose paintings have motivated me in a number of ways" (p.xi). Shahani (2006) states: "Any influences governing the art of Kiran? Among many others, perhaps there is one of De Kooning of German School of Abstract Expressionism, where figures are not always banished but flow out of the abstract canvas" (p.54). Singh (2006) says that Kiran Manandhar's paintings have integrated several foreign elements in terms of stylistic tendencies.

Mishra (2045 B.S.) comments: "The contemporary art of Nepal today is proceeding with various trends. Some artists are akin to reflect national identity in art, whereas others look interested to assimilate some prevailing trends from outside world" (p.22). Some critics have pointed out the problems faced by Nepali artists in the execution of painting which has its own identity. According to Singh (1976), contemporary Nepali artists have exploited the western art techniques from impressionist to abstract expressionist which are already old in the western world. To create a true identity of Nepali painting, Nepali artists now should make themselves free from the influence of these western art forms. They have not been able to develop their own distinct idiom for their expression yet (Singh 1976). In an exhibition catalog, Bangdel (2061 B.S.) pointed out that during the last forty years Nepali art could not achieve any concrete progress, and it still remains as if it is in the beginning stage. Although there were some attempts to give new trends in Nepali art, artists could not give continuity to them (Bangdel, 2061 B.S.).

According to Bibas (2055 B.S.), the western influence disrupted the smooth and continuous development of Nepali art. Likewise, contemporary Nepali artists have failed to create their distinct identity in their works by exploiting alien influences. They are only imitating alien art forms and pretending of being so-called artists which is an annihilation of the self. Due to the lack of the artists' sensibility toward native tradition and personal vision, contemporary Nepali art has degenerated and declined (Bibas, 2055 B.S.). According to Ramkumar Bhaukaji (2053 B.S.), contemporary Nepali painting is degenerated due to the lack of thought, creativity, craftsmanship and expression. In the name of creation, so-called artists are splashing the colors in the canvas randomly and superficially (Bhaukaji, 2053 B.S.). To be modern and abstract artists, Nepali painters are trying to imitate western paintings, sometimes randomly splashing colors on canvas in the name of abstract art, pretending of creating art, being modern artists and abstractionists. This is the underestimation of the viewers, but it actually shows the rupture in the self.

Conclusion

There are surprising trends in Nepali arts. Some artists have the attitude that the west is the best. So, they have imitated the western art techniques and forms ignoring their own tradition, voice and context. Such imitation and representation neither satisfy the artist nor the viewers but the artist still emulates thinking that he will be modern by imitating the western art form. Some artists use more than one hundred years old western techniques in their arts and call them modern arts. The writers always try to cite the books and articles of western writers to show themselves up to date. In Kathmandu Valley, there are many institutes, schools and colleges which are named after western towns, universities, famous places and persons like Richmond, Oxford, Cambridge, Lincoln, Henry Ford, Clinton, Xavier and Harvard. Giving such names, the owner of the schools and colleges attempt to give the feeling to the young students that they are in the western countries. For them, this is the sign of modernity. There is a debate whether secular federalism was the demand of Nepali people or it has been imported as we have imported western art forms. Nevertheless, we have a federal secular republic, but what have we done with it? Is it like the acting of modern Nepali paintings? This is the question to think upon. This is the time to reflect on ourselves.

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