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## **Symbolic Significance of Contemporary Nepali Sculptures**

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### **Abstract**

Contemporary Nepali sculptures suggest ideas, concepts, and invisible reality through symbols. The symbols are images that suggest ideas beyond themselves. The symbols link the visible world to the invisible reality indicated by the artworks. The symbolic sculptures suggest spiritual, social, and political ideas indirectly from the distance. Such symbolic arts can be interpreted in multiple ways since the signifier and the signified are not directly linked. The symbols in these sculptures bring the narratives of creation, cooperation, harmony, and human existence. The fish is the symbol of nonviolence. Lotus is the symbol of enlightenment. Some symbols are established by the cultural tradition, whereas some symbols are uniquely created by the artists themselves. Contemporary Nepali sculpture is an area of research which has been studied from the perspective of symbolism. This is qualitative research since the sculptures can be interpreted in multiple ways.

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**Keywords:** contemporary Nepali sculpture, symbol, invisible, plural, spiritual, creation

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### **Introduction**

Contemporary Nepali sculptors have used symbols in their sculptures that signify concepts and ideas beyond the presented images. To derive the meaning, one needs to interpret the symbols in the artwork, and the meanings can be multiple. These symbolic sculptures aesthetically communicate the message of creation, cooperation, harmony, and spirituality. Before supporting the thesis statement by interpreting the artworks, it would be worth briefly introducing contemporary Nepali sculptures. The term "contemporary Nepali sculpture" in this context means the sculptures created in the present context (Sharma, 2020). These artworks are different from traditional sculptures, for traditional Nepali sculptures are based on mythical contents and established iconography, whereas contemporary sculptures do not have fixed subject matters and techniques of presentation (Mishra, 2045 B.S.). Traditional sculptures are referential, and some of them are realistic (Aran, 1978). On the other hand, contemporary sculptures are distorted and abstract which are not objective representation of the characters and things but subjective response to the contemporary context (Subedi, 1992). The images and figures in artworks cannot be directly linked to the objects and events of the external world (Sharma, 2009). This trend in Nepali sculptures appeared in the latter half of the twentieth century and it is still in practice.

Symbol is a technique of expression that does not communicate the message directly but provides a sense of suggestion (Langer, 1979). The presented image in the artwork attempts to tell more than it appears to our eyes (Carlyle, 1992). We have a sense of deeper meaning that the image signifies. This paper attempts to trace symbols in contemporary Nepali sculptures and



interpret their significance. The concept of symbol in relation to art has been elaborated below in a separate section.

### **Research Methodology**

The research area of this study is contemporary Nepali sculpture, which has been explored from the perspective of symbolism. Symbolism is the tool for the interpretation and discussion of sculptures. The thesis statement of the paper has been supported by interpreting the sculptures. It is qualitative research since the sculptures have been interpreted to support the paper's thesis statement. The interpretations of the artworks can be multiple depending on the viewers, time, and context. Sculptures are primary sources, and the books and articles on art are secondary sources. Artists' studios and the sites (where the sculptures have been installed) have been visited to view the artworks for description and interpretation. Concerned artists have been interviewed to trace their vision of the compositions.

### **Symbols in Artworks**

Artists apply symbols to suggest deeper meanings in indirect manner. It is an image in creation that can imply immaterial, ideal, or invisible truth (Berefelt, 1969). Symbolism is a Western art movement that began in the 19th century that emphasized on the use of symbols that suggest beyond the presented image. Symbolists sought to present emotions and ideas through the subtle and suggestive application of forms (Berefelt, 1969). Images, shapes and figures in artworks can have symbolic values. Carlyle (1992) states that a symbol suggests the silence and secrecy in creative compositions. This is an ambivalent sign of concealment and revelation at the same time. The symbol reveals something but it does not do so with clarity. It gives enough space to the viewers' imagination. The finite symbolic form of aesthetic object embodies infinite possibilities for perception and interpretation (Carlyle 1992). The symbolists tried to liberate arts from their descriptions in detail. The symbols make a work of art concise and compact. They evoke the intuitions of the viewer's inner life to communicate the invisible mystery of existence despite the difficulty in deriving precise significance (Langer, 1979). Symbolic artworks suggest the state of the artist's imagination and hint at the dark and silent reality around us.

Music suggests some visible sense and picture within us though we cannot see it externally. Similarly, symbols suggest plural significances. We hear the rhythm and melody but we are unable to pinpoint the exact meaning of that music. Likewise, we can see the symbols in sculptures and their significance may be multiple (Sharma, 2021). The application of symbols increases the aesthetic quality of the artworks. The symbols stress the inner qualities of the visuals (Rampley, 1997). The visual presentation is based on the creator's conviction that there is a different reality beyond the visible image (Langer 24). The intangible reality can be glimpsed through the creative responses of the sculptures. Symbolists turn toward the mystical aspects of reality. The artworks create the subtle connection between the visible and invisible existence through the suggestive qualities of artworks (Balter, 2009). Profound significances of reality can be perceived intuitively through the symbols.

In Nepali sculptures, the lotus symbolizes purity and enlightenment (Ward, 1952). Lotus grows in mud but the beautiful flower is untouched by the mud. The symbol signifies that human beings are connected to material reality, but they should attempt to achieve enlightenment by transcending the material world. Lotus is also the symbol of our consciousness and the entire universe. It is believed that the *Kundalini Shakti* (power) in the body of enlightened being

develops into a lotus flower with thousand petals on the head. Lotus is also the symbol of Prakriti, the creative power and the mother (Shakya, 2000). This research paper traces symbols in contemporary Nepali sculptures and attempts to highlight their significance.

### **Interpretation and Discussion of Sculptures**

Contemporary Nepali sculptors have used symbols in their artworks to suggest meanings beyond the presented images and shapes. These symbols have multiple significances associated with myths, culture, and personal visions. Some represented sculptures have been interpreted to support the thesis statement. Laxman Bhujel's stone sculpture "Inner Eye" in Smriti Banbatika, Devdaha, symbolizes the power of the human mind for abstraction. We have seen the two eyes of human beings but we have not seen the internal eye. We even do not know either it exists or not since we cannot find it in physical form, and we cannot prove it. Nevertheless, we can feel and



Fig.1 Laxman Bhujel. "Inner Eye", 2022



Fig.2 Laxman Bhujel. "Untitled", 2020

experience existence, though the mental picture is different from person to person. Sometimes, we see the things that we have not seen in the world. Furthermore, we see something within us even if we close our eyes. How can we see that? The title indicates that we perceive such images, pictures, and symbols due to the inner eye. The thoughts on love, kindness, compassion, spirituality, divinity and the quest for the self and the universe are connected to imagination and abstract thought. We understand what we have seen but sometimes, we understand what is not seen and what is not presented, we understand what is not said. This is possible due to inner eye. This can be an empathetic

understanding among human beings. The understanding leads to cooperation and coexistence in harmony. The inner eye is related to the abstraction. The visual abstract form attempts to capture the invisible and intangible aspects of reality.

The flow and movement of abstract thought is always smooth and spontaneous, which is suggested by the texture of the surface of the sculpture. The work arouses the tactile sensation. We enjoy seeing it, we enjoy touching it, and moving our hand over the surface, yet we cannot figure out what it is. However, we enjoy seeing and feeling it. The aesthetic aspects of the works are in the foreground. The joy of traveling together with the inner eye and getting tactile and visual sensations are similar. The spontaneous ride goes on and on in both cases. The visual symbol and shape suggest the invisible aspects of reality.

The artwork appears to be organic and lively. It is the quest of life itself in the world. The shape seems to have been created. It grows and takes shape and reaches to the climax. It cannot remain in height for long time, as a result it descends down and takes rest for the time being. The rest is preparation for another projection of energy. The individual goes ahead and sets back to adjust to life's rhythm. The single symbol suggests this fluctuation of life.

Bhujel's stone sculpture "Untitled" symbolizes the fertility and source of creation. The work represents Prakriti, or female principle (Khadka, 1995). The entire shape is a blend of triangles and circles. The entire shape can be divided in three shapes like a semicircle and two triangles. Two triangles and a circle are combined in such a way that the junction appears as a hollow triangle in the middle of the solid object. The visible shape and smooth texture brings the image of the monumental sensual lady with ample creative power. The beauty of texture is the beauty of nature. The modeling with volume and the rhythmic curves on the muscles suggest the possibility of pleasure, joy and creation. From the periphery, the focal point takes us to center and to the depth of imagination. Bhujel (2022) states in an interview: "Beauty and pleasure are the sources of life. They make us free from melancholy, alienation and anxiety. The creative power of nature motivates us to action and create. We make a sense of life when the energy flows within us. The rapture of creativity is linked to the life and its meaning. This is the reason I create such sculpture." Laxman Bhujel's symbolic sculptures suggest a broader horizon of life and the world.

Om Bahadur Khatri's stone sculpture "Matsya" symbolizes multiple ideas like divinity, spirituality, life, coexistence, and peace. The monumental sculpture appears to be a huge fish symbolizing the *Matsya* avatar (incarnation of Lord Vishnu in the form of fish), who saves the earth from drowning under the ocean. The fish is worshipped like the divinity. The worshipping and praying of fish also has eco-critical significance in the sense that when we worship the fish like a deity, we save this animal, keeping the biological chain intact (Khatri, 2022). The myth is related to real life.



Fig.3 Om Bahadur Khatri. "Matsya", 2022

Fish is also a sign of good luck. As shown in early paintings and sculptures related to the nativity of Buddha, when Siddhartha Gautam was born, he walked seven steps and stood on the pyramid of lotus. At that time, Lord Indra and Brahma welcome Buddha with rice grain and fish. The acceptance of new faith by the early one is a unique example of religious tolerance (Bhattarai, 2022). The fish is also a symbol of nonviolence and peace. According to a Buddhist myth, there is a unique fish in the water, for it moves away when other fish quarrel with it. The confrontation and clash lead to violence and death and escaping conflict provides peace and life.

In the next level, the fish is the symbol of water and life. Where there is fish, there is water. Where there is water, there is life. Life begins in water and develops with the supply of water.

Om Khatri's monumental sculpture has plural forms, for it suggests multiple shapes at the same time. At one glance, the whole shape resembles a large fish. While looking from another

side, the artwork appears to be the combination of two fish in playful manner. The connection of two organisms coherently and harmoniously symbolizes the union of Prakriti and Purasa, the individual self and cosmic being. The entire visual is in motion toward the east, suggesting the rising sun, brightness, and enlightenment.

Rajan Kaphle's "Jeevan Chakra" symbolizes the existential reality of life through circular shapes on the stone. Life begins at the center. It grows when it finds a suitable environment and expands its periphery around the circle. Time changes and seasons change. Green leaves change into yellow and brown and finally fall down. The tree without leaves seems as if it is dead but with spring, the leaves, and buds sprout, and



Fig.4 Rajan Kaphle. "Jeevan Chakra" 2012 A.D.

the tree again appears green. There is always fluctuation in life as the movement of yin and yang. Happiness and sadness, success and failure, day and night present the colors of life (Kaphle, 2022). We move toward the center and margin, and sometimes in between. The movement of life and energy presents our existence. When the movement stops, we are assimilated to the background or reach the depth of darkness. Rajan Kaphle's sculpture suggests these ideas in his aesthetic visual form.

Yam Bahadur Thapa's stone sculpture "Arrival of Buddha" symbolizes good luck that foreshadows the conception and birth of Buddha, his spiritual journey and enlightenment. The figure of an elephant in the sculpture holds a lotus flower. The symbol leads toward the narrative

of Queen Mayadevi, her dream and its significance (Bhattarai, 2022). In her dream, six tusked elephant with lotus flower comes and enters within her body (Lopez, 2001). When she wakes up, she shares the dream with King Suddhodhan. Then, they consulted an astrologer and asked about the significance of the dream. He forecasted that the she will give birth to a child who will be a great sage. Then, the child was born as Siddhartha Gautam. The child grows. The king remembers the astrologer's words and wants to avoid the forecast, for he wants to make the prince a good king. So, to avoid the pain, suffering and curiosity about the



Fig.5 Yam Bahadur Thapa. "Arrival of Buddha", 2022

world, the king does not allow his son to go outside the palace premise. But the curiosity of the prince increased more and more, and finally, he crossed the limitation and witnessed the sickness, suffering and death. He left the palace and went for meditation to find causes and solution of the suffering (Hirakawa, 1990). When he achieved Nirvana, he understood the problem and its solution, and shared his knowledge to the world. The dream sets course of real life of Siddhartha Gautam (Thapa, 2022). In some myths, elephant selects the king. In this narrative, the elephant select the mother of Lord Buddha. The lotus flower is the symbol of knowledge and enlightenment.

Raju Pithakote's sculpture "Mamata" symbolizes contrast between order and disorder, coherence and conflict. There are lines and vines around the head of a female figure, the symbol of mother. On one side, the lines move randomly and clash to each other breaking the surface into small fragments. On the other side, the lines and vines are moving in rhythm, harmony and order. No line clashes to the other. All the lines are converted to a flower. It means harmony, order and coexistence assist to flourish our dream. The artist is worried seeing the clash among various groups in Nepal and offers the solution to this problem (Pithakote, 2022). He wants harmony and nonviolence in the society. Motherly love, compassion and cooperation are the ways for peace and harmony.



Fig.6 Raju Pithakote. "Mamata", 2022

Lalkaji Lama's symbols in his sculptures indicate social and political degeneration and corruption. His sculpture "Twisted Pen" symbolizes the intellectual corruption. Real pens are straight, but the artist's pen is altered,



Fig.7 Lalkaji Lama. "Twisted Pen", 2020

twisted and irregular as if the broken pen has been rejoined in abnormal manner. It is the symbol of contemporary intellectuals who do not dare to tell the truth, write to please the power, political leaders, and authority so that they can get little things to supply for their petty personal needs (Lama, 2022). In civilized society, the intellectuals do not become the slave of power but they criticize the corruption, misconducts and wrong policies of the nation. In other words, they take corrective measures to fix the derailed system. The artist looks at the state of intellectuals in the present context where they are going from door to door and begging for alms. The authority loses faith on their intellectual ability, and their critical and creative thinking, for he thinks their learning has made them hungry beggar. Now, the power does not count them as intellectuals but the beggars. This is dangerous for both the nation and the intellectuals who hold twisted pen (Lama, 2022). The artwork symbolizes that intellectuals themselves are more responsible to create such attitude in the society.

### **Conclusion**

Contemporary Nepali sculptures are symbolic, suggesting the ideas, concepts, and visions beyond the presented image. The symbolic artworks have deeper significance associated with the cultures, myths and artist's personal vision. Sometimes, the same symbol signifies multiple meanings. Fish symbolizes creation, divinity, and nonviolence. The lotus symbolizes purity, Prakriti, and enlightenment. Elephant is the symbol of good luck. The inner eye symbolizes abstract thought and invisible human experience. Pen is the symbol of intellectuals. Sometimes, the sculptures use symbols as a tool for expression and criticize the social and political



corruption from a distance. These symbolic sculptures explore themes of spirituality, harmony, ethics, and peace in a subtle and suggestive manner.

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