

BODIES, POWER AND DIFFERENCE: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE EAST-WEST DIVIDE IN THE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF INDIAN AESTHETICS

PARUL DAVE-MUKHERJI

This paper attempts to raise certain methodological issues concerning the study of Indian aesthetics. It seeks to draw attention to the need for conceptual rigour in the usage of related terms derived from western aesthetics through a critique of the comparative method in the study of Indian aesthetics. In particular, this method, predicated upon a certain binarism (east/west; culture/nature; practice/theory), offers a disciplinary coherence to comparative aesthetics even as it renders it open to criticism. In the process, the body as represented in art emerges as the site of contestation through which cultural difference is negotiated within a larger politics of visual representation.

I.

The Disciplinary Formation of Aesthetics and Colonialism

Aesthetics, as a concept applicable to art, emerged in the west by the eighteenth century.¹ It was only later that it consolidated itself as a discipline allied to that of art history.² Along with other disciplines, it too was deeply related to colonialism and it was through the process of colonisation that it entered the academic curricula of the Indian universities.³ Foregrounding the systematic complicity between the disciplinary formations of domains of knowledge and the political structure of imperialism, Edward Said's *Orientalism*⁴ has crucial implications for the discipline of aesthetics as well. The latter, as a

¹ Michael Kelly, "Origins of Aesthetics: Historical and Conceptual Overview," *Encyclopaedia of Aesthetics*, Vol. III. Oxford University Press, Oxford 1998, pp. 417-427.

² Eugene Kleinbauer, *Modern Perspectives in Western Art History*, University of California, Los Angeles 1971, p. 2.

³ Chatterjee, Partha (ed.), *Texts of Power: Emerging Disciplines in Colonial Bengal*, Samya Calcutta 1996, p. 26.

part of western academic knowledge, can no longer maintain its impartial status and has been shown to be complicit in the history of European colonialism. By the first decade of the twentieth century, the first International Congress of Aesthetics (ICA) was held in Berlin. Such International Congresses seemed to work from the assumption that aesthetics has universal applicability and value. The Berlin conference and the subsequent formation of the discipline followed the logic of a possible universal aesthetics.⁵ The effect of such a logic was an inevitable homogenisation of cultural difference. Now it is possible to see how the cultural dominance of the west was precariously maintained through its prescription of a set of aesthetic values derived from the west.⁶ These values became “normal” in judging the art of different cultures. This cultural hegemony carried over even after the colonised nations gained their political sovereignty.

It is only from a post-colonial perspective that one can see the various stakes involved in the erasure of the cultural difference. Even while one recognises the necessity for engagement with the question of universalism, it is important to take note of the way difference has been theorised within the framework of comparative aesthetics. It is not as if the question of difference has not been raised under the rubric of the universalism of comparative aesthetics. Scholars of Indian art and comparative philosophy such as A. K. Coomaraswamy and P. Masson-Oursel have raised the question of difference only to foreclose it through cultural essentialisation. At this juncture it is necessary to raise once again the question of difference, which takes into account the consequences of universalism on one hand and essentialism on the other.⁷

The historical fact of colonisation has been foregrounded not for indulging in the politics of blame but for historicising the emergence of the discipline in the west and the circumstances of its entry into India. As a concept and a discipline which organically evolved at a specific historical juncture, underpinned by certain culturally specific imperatives within the west,⁸ what does it offer to the study of Indian art and culture? How productive is it as a set of conceptual categories to interrogate the tradition from a postcolonial present?

⁴ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, New York 1978, p. 27.

⁵ Archie Bahm, “Is a Universal Science of Aesthetics Possible?,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, XXXI (1972), pp. 3-7. Bahm addresses this issue in form of a question and answers in the affirmative.

⁶ Tony Bennett, “Really Useless ‘Knowledge’: A Political Critique of Aesthetics,” in: H Blocker & Jennifer M Jeffers (eds.), *Conceptualizing Aesthetics: From Plato to Lyotard*. Wadsworth California 1999, pp. 294-301.

⁷ Leela Gandhi, “Thinking Otherwise,” in: *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Delhi 1999, p.27.

⁸ Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetics*, Oxford and Cambridge, Mass., 1990.

This question seems to pose two sets of methodological alternatives:

1. To claim that the concept of aesthetics is too culturally specific to be useful in the study of non-western culture. Aesthetics, in this sense, has no meaning outside the European context and hence, is to be abandoned. Such an approach would juxtapose the west and the east as polar opposites and yet at the same time, constitute the very ground of "the comparative method."

2. Aesthetics is that which defines the human essence and has universal applicability and so it can be a useful category in the study of any culture. Every culture has the potential to add a unique dimension to this overarching concept. Such an understanding would lead to and inform attempts which set out to study the diverse formulation and cultural variations of the concept of aesthetics. A corollary to this approach would be a feverish search, as for example, for Indian equivalents for every aesthetic concept such as "imitation," "catharsis," "imagination," "beauty" and so forth in traditional Indian texts. It is the latter approach which has found wide acceptability in the works of some Indian scholars.⁹

To illustrate and examine these two approaches, I will specifically focus on the works of two very influential ideologues and scholars, P. Masson-Oursel and K. C. Pandey, who advocated "the comparative method" in the disciplines of Philosophy¹⁰ and Aesthetics respectively. For analysing their positions, I have selected an article by Masson-Oursel entitled *A Connection Between Indian Aesthetics and Philosophy*¹¹ and K. C. Pandey's book *Comparative Aesthetics*¹² as representative of the methods that demonstrate either a radical difference or an overlap between Indian and Western Aesthetics. As a point of entry into the critique of the comparative method, I shall take up the problem of the translation of terms, which bears upon the field of comparative aesthetics. I shall then narrow down my focus to one of the key terms from Indian aesthetics – *pramana* and one such term from western aesthetics – "imitation" and critique their translation/ interpretation by Masson-Oursel and K. C. Pandey respectively.

⁹ P. J. Chaudhury, "Catharsis in the Light of Indian Aesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Supplement to the Oriental issue XXIV No. 1, Part 1 (Fall:1965), pp.151-163. Ramendra Kumar Sen, "Imagination in Coleridge and Abhinavagupta: A Critical Analysis of Christian and Saiva Standpoints," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Special issue, *Oriental Aesthetics*, XXIV No. 1, Part 1 (Fall:1965), pp. 97-107.

¹⁰ P. Masson-Oursel, *Comparative Philosophy*, Paris, 1926 as cited in *India and Europe*, 1988, p. 420.

¹¹ P. Masson-Oursel, "A Comparison Between Indian Aesthetics and Philosophy," Trans. A.K.Coomaraswamy (from *Review Des Arts Asiatique*), *Rupam* 27/28 (1925), pp. 91-94.

¹² K. C. Pandey, *Comparative Aesthetics, Indian Aesthetics & Western Aesthetics*. Chowkhambe Sanskrit Series, Banaras 1956, p. 3.

II.

P. Masson-Oursel and Comparative Philosophy

Though primarily a French Indologist and a scholar of Philosophy, P. Masson-Oursel (1882-1956) made a significant contribution with his writings on Indian aesthetics, which played a key role in the nationalist defense of traditional Indian art. The other is an Indian scholar of aesthetics, K. C. Pandey, whose work on comparative aesthetics was regarded as a seminal work in the field in the 50's and 60's of the 20th century.

Masson-Oursel was regarded in his dual role as Indologist and "positivistic" philosopher as, an official spokesman for India and the Orient within the French historiography of philosophy.¹³ K. C. Pandey, on the other hand, used "the comparative method" within the field of aesthetics and was familiar with Indian as well as western theories of aesthetics.¹⁴ In terms of theoretical assumptions, Masson-Oursel and K. C. Pandey can be said to have important differences and commonalities.

Masson-Oursel was deeply committed to the view that the Indian and the Greek philosophies and art traditions were so fundamentally different that any form of comparison could only demonstrate the unbridgeable difference. However, both Masson-Oursel and K. C. Pandey appear to subscribe to "the totality of the human phenomenon" by analyzing and comparing its different manifestations in various cultural traditions. They were both committed to a search for recurrent isomorphic features, common structures (which Masson-Oursel termed as "proportions") in mutually independent traditions. Masson-Oursel's "claim to be a totally open-minded cartographer of the human mind with a true universality, no longer bound by the restrictions of being part of one particular tradition"¹⁵ seems to echo in the introduction of K. C. Pandey's *Comparative Aesthetics*.

A careful study of the aesthetic theories of the Western thinkers from Sophist Gorgias (about 470 BC) and Socrates (469-399 BC) to Croce (1866-1952) produces an impression on the mind of one who is familiar with Indian Aesthetics that the East and the West have thought on the problem of the beautiful in ways which have a marked similarity and, therefore, there is ample

¹³ Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding*, State University of New York Press, Albany 1988, p.142.

¹⁴ K. C. Pandey, *Comparative Aesthetics, Indian Aesthetics & Western Aesthetics*. 2 vols. Varanasi: The Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series IV, 1956, p. 7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

scope for a comparative approach to the problem of aesthetics. Such an impression has been responsible for my thesis "Comparative Aesthetics."¹⁶

Aesthetics, according to this problematic, is a unitary phenomenon and every culture partakes of it equally.¹⁷ Halbfass's comments on Masson-Oursel's project also hold true for that of K. C. Pandey's: His thought seems to represent an objectifying, detached meta-philosophy [*meta-aesthetics in the case of Comparative Aesthetics*] which no longer engages in any actual problems and subject matters of the various philosophical traditions, but treats them all equally as objects of comparative anthropological enquiry.¹⁸

As an advocate of comparative philosophy, Masson-Oursel used "the comparative method" not only to juxtapose Indian with western culture but within the different facets of Indian culture.¹⁹ In his article, Indian aesthetics and philosophy are compared via a terminological analysis of *pramana*, a term common to both the spheres of Indian culture. It is taken to be an important project to *dispel prejudices* and is addressed primarily to the *western* audience – both the critics and admirers of Indian art. This seminal essay belongs to the mid 20's of the twentieth century when there was a divided opinion among the English public about the relative worth of traditional Indian art. To counter the colonial denigration of Indian art, the Orientalists and the nationalists in India articulated a powerful and rhetorical counter-posture extolling Indian art, for example, in the writings by E. B. Havell and A. K. Coomaraswamy.²⁰ Whether traditional Indian art was "naturalistic" was the main rallying point and an issue of confrontation between the two camps. It is the corporeal body which is invoked around which claims of authenticity in terms of beauty or truth are staged. (Plate I.)

To every western art critic who discusses the Indian conception of beauty, those who blame the Hindus for their supposed anatomical errors, as well as those who attribute to them a transcendental idealism, we can only recommend a study of the *Citralaksana*.²¹ It will open their eyes and dispel their prejudices;²²

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xxix.

¹⁷ See Van Meter Ames, "Aesthetic values in the East and West," in: *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* XIX, No.1, (1960) pp. 3-16, for similar assumptions in *Comparative Aesthetics*.

¹⁸ Wilhelm Halbfass, p. 142.

¹⁹ A student of Levy-Bruhl and S. Levi, Masson-Oursel propagated the "comparative method" as the culmination of the "positive method;" see Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe*, p. 142.

²⁰ Tapati Guha Thakurta, *The Making of a New Indian Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal, 1850-1920*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1992, pp. 159-167.

²¹ An ancient treatise on art in Sanskrit of approximately 3rd-4th century AD.

²² Masson-Oursel, "A Comparison Between Indian Aesthetics and Philosophy," Trans. From *Review Des Arts Asiatique*, A. K. Coomaraswamy, *Rupam* 27/28 (1925), p. 92.

Apart from the ancient art treatise, Masson-Oursel draws attention to what he considered a key connection between Indian aesthetics and Indian philosophy via a term common to both. This he takes to be "*pramana*:"²³ The idea of "*pramana*" plays a role of primary importance equally in the aesthetic and the philosophy of India from the third century of the Christian era onwards; it has to a large degree determined the scholastic character of Asiatic



PLATE 1. Emperor Mandhata surrounded by personified attributes/possessions of a king, such as the queen, the army, minister, etc., Jaggayapeta, Satavahana Period, 2nd C. BCE., Government Museum, Madras, India.



PLATE 2. Yakshi or semi-divine goddess, Sandstone, Kushana Period, Mathura Museum, 2nd C. BCE, Mathura, India.

²³ The Sanskrit term *pramana*, commonly found in technical treatises on art, is open to a variety of interpretation ranging from systems of body measurement, modular or otherwise to a sense of proportion in the representation of bodies of all kinds, human, animal or vegetable.

culture?²⁴And, Indianists have too long ignored the aesthetic sense of the term “pramana;” they have considered only its philosophical meaning and for this reason, have misunderstood the meaning. Their usual renderings are: source, faculty of knowing or even criterion of truth.²⁵

For Masson-Oursel, it is aesthetic “*pramana*,” which is to be privileged over the philosophical one and which contains the key to the “real” or “authentic” meaning. *Pramana*, as one of the six “limbs” of painting, means “the science of proportion, in relation to perspective and anatomical structure” or as in the *Citralaksana*, “the science of measure.” (Plate 2.)

The science of plastic representation (*citra*) consists in knowing the characteristic measurements of the different parts of the bodies of innumerable beings which the artist may wish to represent: a god, a *cakravartin*, a king, a Buddha, a Bodhisattva, a monk or demon, etc.²⁶

It seems to me that via the aesthetic *pramana*, which Masson-Oursel interprets as timeless stereotypes (Plate 3.) which are repeated by the traditional artists mindlessly, he conveniently applies the same paradigm to Indian philosophy. In other words, the conclusion that Masson-Oursel wants us reach is that just as the Indian artist merely reproduced the “characteristic measurements” by which the representation of the different kinds of bodies are once and for all fixed, the Indian philosopher continued to philosophise in a formulaic mode. His position vis-à-vis this controversy over the existence of “naturalism” in Indian art is summed up thus: ...Indian art is aiming at something quite different than the copying of nature.²⁷

This difference rejects and at the same time enables comparison between the art of the eastern and the western cultures. Polarising these two art traditions in terms of presence and absence of “naturalism,” Masson-Oursel firmly holds the view that unlike the western artist, the Indian artist attached no importance to the observation or reproduction of nature but only reproduced the conventional types as handed down by the tradition. And herein lay the eternal scholastic nature of Indian art: What we assume, quite superficially, to be the inspiration of an art for art’s sake, really proceeds from a religious scholasticism that implies a traditional classification of types established by convention.

Any presence of “naturalism” in Indian art can only be understood as unintentional or accidental: If here or there a relief or a painting exhibits some features drawn from life, it is only accidentally that the artist has, in

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

spite of himself, transcribed something from actual nature; and this is certainly not, from the indigenous point of view, the most meritorious part of his work.²⁸

This claim to have attained *the indigenous point of view* by Masson-Oursel is enabled by the very problematic of "the comparative method:" The best way to enter at all into the genius of any great historic culture seems to be to approach it simultaneously from several points of view;²⁹

The contradiction involved in this methodology of the awareness of one's location within one's specific culture and the claim to view other cultures from a transcendental vantage point from which they are visible did not go unacknowledged by this French Indologist as he continued: Even though the observations to which one thus commits oneself be fragmentary and somewhat arbitrary.³⁰ What is accomplished by the detour to the *pramana* in "Indian Aesthetics" is the emptying out of any sense of "naturalism" or "empiri-



PLATE 3. Lakshmi, Goddess of Abundance, Kushana Period, 1st C. AD., National Museum, New Delhi, India.



PLATE 4. Bodhisattva or Future Buddha, Ajanta Wall Painting, Cave No. 1, Vakataka Period, Late 5th C. AD., Maharashtra, India.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 91.

³⁰ Ibid.

cism" implied by the *pramana* of Indian Philosophy. (Plate 4.) The "pramana" of the philosophers cannot any longer pass for the apprehension of reality. That is what we call real knowledge, but that does not by any means denote knowledge deduced from facts.³¹

The western and the Indian cultures from this point of view are divided along the lines of "nature" and "culture." "Naturalism" and "abstraction" are chalked out as the mutually exclusive domains of the art/philosophy of the west and the non-west. It is the "natural body" which became accessible to the post-Romanesque western artist, whereas throughout history the eastern artist was locked up in the prison-house of the "cultural body" in which tradition is seen purely in negative terms. And is it not surreptitiously rather than openly that our own "imagers" inserted into cathedral decoration details *extraneous* to the traditional scenes composed of abstract figures?³² Or, It follows from this comparison of the *accepted* aesthetic and philosophical meanings of the word "pramana" that Indian artists and metaphysicians were in agreement that it was not material objects, but more or less *a priori* abstract types, whether types of being or types of knowledge, that were worthy of attention.³³

The typical image of the Indian or oriental artist that emerges is someone who neither engages in the world empirically nor one, as the nationalist would have it, who elevates himself above the visible and contemplates art within a mental sphere. Just like the metaphysical philosopher, the Indian artist merely duplicates the received traditional types like an automaton. Abstraction then becomes symptomatic of this permanent mentality of reproducing "types of beings." All types of bodies whether of the kings or demons are represented through "characteristic measurements," where measure exists only to give fixity to the types.

If nature/culture acted as one set of coordinates to articulate the "gulf [that] fundamentally separates Indian and Greek minds,"³⁴ it was mapped onto that of theory/practice:

Platonic types are "ideas," though external to souls, because Hellenic wisdom is a contemplation, *theoria*. Hindu types are acts; ...They may be everlasting but they cannot be eternal; they may be correct, but they cannot be perfect.³⁵

It was only during Middle Ages that the west came closest to the east. While in the next phase, that of the Renaissance, the west freed itself from the

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

³² *Ibid.* [my italics]

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 93. [my italics]

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

prison house of conventions and opened its eyes to the world, the east remained relegated to "its native and permanent mentality" of venerating plastic types in her arts and types of thought, purely practice-oriented in her philosophy. Nothing is more unusual than for man [for the Indian philosophers and artists] to open his eyes upon the world. The West, in general, up to the Renaissance, venerated concepts. The East, though often voluptuous, has until now despised nature.³⁶

III.

K. C. Pandey and Comparative Aesthetics

While "the comparative method" used by Masson-Oursel serves to set apart the east and the west as diametrically opposite, K. C. Pandey deploys it to heighten affinities, similarities and homologies by assuming that both aesthetics and philosophy formed a part of a common, universal heritage. This assumption underscores K. C. Pandey's interpretation of "imitation" and its translation into the Sanskrit term – "*anukrti*:" ...the first principle that was followed by the artists in their production in the hoary past, both in the West and the East, was imitation. It consisted of the production of a copy of what was directly perceptible in some medium such as clay or stone. It is interesting to note that the word "mimesis," the Greek equivalent of "imitation," continued to be used by successive writers on aesthetics, though each of them considerably altered or modified the original meaning of it, exactly as the Sanskrit word "*anukrti*," used at first by Bharata,³⁷ the earliest available authority on Aesthetics, was retained by the subsequent writers, though each put his own meaning upon it.³⁸

What is "mimesis" in Greek equals "imitation" in English and which in turn equals "*anukrti*" in Sanskrit. Such a translation and a terminological equation is accomplished by unproblematically assuming that they are of equal semantic weight and form a unitary concept which cuts across cultural boundaries and historical exigencies.

For me, translating "imitation" or "mimesis" into *anukrti* or vice versa poses a major theoretical problem, i.e. a problem of the theory of translation. This problem of the translatability of these terms is itself of theoretical interest and methodological relevance. Every translator works within a theory of

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

³⁷ An ancient author of a treatise on Dramaturgy, *Natyasastra* of the 1st century AD.

³⁸ K. C. Pandey, *Comparative Aesthetics: Western Aesthetics* vol. II, Varanasi, 1956, p. 7.

translation whether acknowledged or not. Let us examine the theory operating in K. C. Pandey's translation.

Translation is essentially a matter of matching written sentences or word-units in two languages, as for example, Sanskrit (*anukrti*) and English/Greek (imitation/mimesis), such that the second set of sentences or word-units becomes the "real meaning" of the first. This theory of translation can be traced back to a certain discursive space and disciplinary formation within the western academic tradition and most prevalent in traditional anthropology.³⁹ It seems ironic that an Indian scholar interpreting texts belonging to his "native" tradition would have anything in common with an anthropologist who translates/interprets the tradition of the Other. However, it is more a question of what discursive space a scholar occupies and of the theoretical assumptions that are internalised at a specific historical juncture of that particular discipline, i.e. of comparative aesthetics.

For me, both these approaches of "the comparative method" are fraught with serious theoretical problems. While Masson-Oursel's methodology ends up polarising the west and the east as mutually exclusive domains and assumes that both possess a unique essence, the second approach as advocated by K. C. Pandey collapses all cultural differences and remains caught in the search for equivalents of those concepts in the Indian texts which have a very specific sense within western aesthetics. Rather than subscribing to any one of them, it would be more productive to first historicise the discipline of aesthetics in its culturally specific setting in the west and employ it as a heuristic device for exploring and theorising the *difference* that the Indian context poses.

IV.

Polemics of "Naturalism" and Comparative Aesthetics

Critically examining the problematic term/concept "naturalism," which Masson-Oursel viewed as a phenomenon or institution central to western self-understanding, is there not a way out of this binary? Is the alternative to this possible only in negating this position by insisting that there is also an Indian naturalism just as there is an Indian theory of imitation or mimesis equally valid and adequate as its western counterpart?

The theoretical problems involved entail of a great deal of complexity

³⁹ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Disciplines and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London 1993, p. 188.

and are certainly not raised here for the first time. Around 1966, Archie J. Bahm gestured towards this vexed site of comparative aesthetics astutely while reviewing Thomas Munro's *Oriental Aesthetics*.⁴⁰

Although entitled *Oriental Aesthetics*, this work is really a study in comparative (i.e. East-West) aesthetics. ... [it] attempts a critical evaluation of *Oriental Aesthetics* from a Western point of view. Such an attempt is fraught with dangers, no matter who makes it. In addition to possibilities for misinterpreting any of the multifarious details, three general mistakes are possible for any one who faces this problem: Those pertaining to generalisations about Oriental cultures, those about Western culture and those having to do with comparisons.⁴¹

It is around the lack of "naturalism" that Munro's oriental aesthetics acquires a definition and the dichotomous framework underlying the comparison between the eastern and western aesthetics which falls under Bahm's critical scrutiny. Does Munro's naturalism adequately represent Western naturalism? Munro is fully aware that "the term 'naturalism' is highly ambiguous."...Nevertheless I accept Munro's naturalism as a typical Western naturalism. He makes no attempt to provide a definition of naturalism in *Oriental Aesthetics*, but we can guess what he means from scattered negative statements. That it is anti-spiritualistic, anti-supernaturalistic, and anti-subjectivistic is already clear.⁴²

The relationship between the west and east structured and mapped onto the self/Other distinction is apparent. That *Oriental Aesthetics* is the site of an articulation of naturalism defined as central to the identity of the west is instructive; the former is assumed to fall outside the domain of the naturalism characterised as western and yet becomes the centre (a negativity) around which western naturalism acquires an identity. While Bahm rightly objects to the essentialisation implicit in the polarised framework informing Munro's *Oriental Aesthetics* and points to the complicitous nature of the relationship between these polarities, the "third alternative" proposed by Bahm in the form of a synthesis becomes problematic. Munro's analysis is so fully preoccupied with seeing differences in terms of spiritualism and supernaturalism versus naturalism, subjectivism versus empiricism and rationalism...that he never countenances a third alternative...and to organising a synthesis in which the polarly opposite characteristics, such as unity and plurality, distinctness and

⁴⁰ Thomas Munro, *Oriental Aesthetics*, Western Reserve University, Cleveland 1965.

⁴¹ Archie Bahm, "Munro's 'Oriental Aesthetics': A Review," in: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol. XXIV No. 4 (1966), pp. 585-586.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 592.

indistinctness, subjectivity and objectivity, function as interdependent aspects rather than as contradictory kinds, of reality...⁴³

Synthesis implies selecting the best out of different traditions and a simple coexistence of the differences, which is contradicted by the recognition of the interdependence between the “contradictory kinds of reality.” It is this underlying assumption that renders “the comparative method” itself deeply problematic whether deployed in Comparative Aesthetics, Comparative Philosophy or Comparative Religion, i.e. mainly because “of its claims of neutrality and openness which their advocates postulate.”⁴⁴

From the perspective of a postcolonial or post-modern present, when “naturalism” as a concept has been radically challenged as it had been accepted within western art history, it is important to re-engage in this debate via a rigorous critique of the terms in usage both in western as well as eastern aesthetics. Norman Bryson via post-structuralist art history has powerfully dismantled deeply entrenched notions of “imitation” and “naturalism” by subsuming them as culturally specific sign systems and arguing against a direct, unmediated access to reality.⁴⁵

V.

Comparative Aesthetics and the Constructions of “Sameness”

Just to demonstrate the absurdities and reductive conclusions that this method led its practitioners to, busy in search of homologies and affinities, let us consider the following comparison⁴⁶ by K. C. Pandey between Vitruvius’s treatise on architecture and an early Indian text on architecture – *Manasara*:

1. The *Manasara* opens with a prayer to the creator, Brahma. Vitruvius begins his work with a prayer to Caesar.

2. According to Vitruvius, an architect should be ingenious and apt in the acquisition of knowledge...a good writer, a skillful draughtsman, versed in geometry and optics, an expert at figures, acquainted with history...In the *Manasara* artists are divided into four classes. Together they form a guild of architects, each an expert in his own department but possessing a general

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 592-593.

⁴⁴ Wilhelm Halbfass, p. 99.

⁴⁵ Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1983, pp. 37-65.

⁴⁶ A 12th century treatise in architecture in Sanskrit dealing with iconometry and architecture.

knowledge of the science of architecture as a whole. They consist of the chief architect (*Sthapati*), the draughtsman or the designer (*sutragrahin*), the painter (*Vardhaki*) and the joiner (*Sutradhara*).⁴⁷

In his search for similarities, K. C. Pandey glosses over a fundamental non-equivalence or asymmetry between the two contexts. Whereas in the Roman case the proper name of the author of the treatise is available, in the latter case, the treatise is referred to by the name of the Sanskrit text.

VI.

Beyond the Logic of Binarism & Synthesis

I am certainly not suggesting that finding differences between the two cultures is more heroic than looking for homologies and hence Masson-Oursel's method is to be valourised over K.C.Pandey's. On the contrary, collapsing differences located within the cultural specificities of any two given traditions in the name of grand universals such as Beauty, Aesthetics and so on or erecting insuperable boundaries of differences between the two are equally problematic. It seems to be more productive to question and move beyond these two alternatives. There is neither a simple transcendence possible, if that is even desirable, itself being a fraught concept, nor a synthesis.

The very fact that there is no one-to-one correspondence between terms like naturalism, imitation or mimesis and the Sanskrit terms, is itself an important conceptual pointer. Of course, the absence of a word does not imply that the concept does not exist. But it offers a significant clue to a rich problematic that needs to be articulated and developed.

It would be too reductive to simply level a charge of ethnocentrism against Masson-Oursel for his denial of naturalism or conscious imitation of the visible world in Indian art but it has to be seen as an attempt of one culture to theorise another at a time when India was still a British colony. In other words, what were the conditions of the production of the knowledge that constitutes Masson-Oursel's representation of the east-west divide? How does his colonial gaze operate on the objectified and mute bodies of Indian art? The power of this gaze almost freezes them in time and makes their historical frame invisible. Or for that matter, K. C. Pandey's unproblematic acceptance of the terms of western aesthetics has to be seen against the history of aesthetics around the middle of 20th century when comparative aesthetics constituted a powerful genre of

⁴⁷ K. C. Pandey, *Comparative Aesthetics*. Vol. II, p. 540.

this discipline. Rather than questioning the polarized framework deployed by the colonizers, Pandey reinstated it with an anxious search for the Indian equivalents to naturalism and imitation in the Sanskrit texts.

However, in the contemporary, postcolonial present, one cannot subscribe to the obsolete methods or assumptions structuring “the comparative method.” An alternative cannot be sought in postulating the east as a separate entity and searching for lost past and indigenous criteria, untouched by western contact, for evaluating its art traditions. That would amount to substituting the nationalist with the nativist discourse and result in methodological insularity and ahistoricity.

The only way to break out of the double binds of the east/west polarisation is to: a) critically historicise first the discipline of aesthetics as it emerged in the west and the terms central to western aesthetics, rather than taking it as Aesthetics, a given and ahistorical, universal concept; b) in a double gesture, to not only problematise their application in a non-western context by foregrounding cultural differences and the rich, complicated terrain of translatability but even to anticipate repercussions that this problematisation could have within western aesthetics. Lastly, the double-bind of the natural body-cultural body mapped onto the western and Indian art traditions has to be dismantled on grounds that both the bodies necessarily intersect in the culturally specific matrices of representation. Privileging one above the other is rarely innocent but complicit in the inequality of the power relationship of class, race and gender. And the issue of who represents whom at what historical juncture is ultimately a question of agency in the politics of representation. When this agent exercises his subjectivity by gazing at the art of the other, the bodies of the latter thus objectified confront semiotic violence.

References

- Asad, Talal, *Genealogies of Religion: Disciplines and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1993.
- Bahm, Archie. J, “Is a Universal Science of Aesthetics Possible?,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* XXXI (1972), pp. 3-7.
- Bennett, Tony, “Really Useless ‘Knowledge’: A Political Critique of Aesthetics,” in: H. Blocker & Jennifer M. Jeffers (eds.), *Conceptualizing Aesthetics: From Plato to Lyotard*, California: Wadsworth, 1999, pp. 294-301.
- Bryson, Norman, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983.

- Chaudhury, P. J., "Catharsis in the Light of Indian Aesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Supplement to the Oriental issue XXIV No. 1, Part 1 Fall (1965), pp. 151-163.
- Eagleton, Terry, *The Ideology of the Aesthetics*, Oxford and Cambridge, Mass., 1990.
- Gandhi, Leela, "Thinking Otherwise," in: *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 27.
- Guha Thakurta, Tapati, *The Making of a New Indian Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850-1920*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Halbfass, Wilhelm, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988.
- Kelly, Michael, "Origins of Aesthetics: Historical and Conceptual Overview," *Encyclopaedia of Aesthetics*. Vol. III., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 417-427.
- Kleinbauer, Eugene, *Modern Perspectives in Western Art History*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971.
- Masson-Oursel, P., "A Comparison Between Indian Aesthetics and Philosophy," Trans. A. K. Coomaraswamy, *Rupam* 27/28 (1925), pp. 91-94.
- Masson-Oursel, P., *Comparative Philosophy*. Paris, 1929 in: *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988.
- Munro, Thomas, *Oriental Aesthetics*, Cleveland: Western Reserve University, 1965.
- Pandey, K.C., *Comparative Aesthetics, Indian Aesthetics & Western Aesthetics*. 2 vols., Varanasi: The Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series IV, 1956.
- Said, Edward W., *Orientalism*, New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1978.
- Sen, Ramendra Kumar, "Imagination in Coleridge and Abhinavagupta: A Critical Analysis of Christian and Saiva Standpoints," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Special issue, *Oriental Aesthetics* XXIV No. 1, Part 1 Fall (1965), pp. 97-107.