Chapter – IV

Art beyond representation: Rabindranath Tagore and his works
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Representation, principally used in aesthetics as pictorial representation. The choice of property of the object that is materialized in the depiction, perceptibly gives an alternative scope of interpretation which is involved in depicting those objects, as the deeper metaphysical argument states that there is no world to be imitated. But the metaphysics on which it is stood assumed to be extremely improbable to the current condition of art which is examined and revived by clearing up and systemizing the concepts on its essence. The vision of artistic fabrication in the modernist age from a postmodern perspective reconsiders the sense of elite and special nature of the art, which reveals its uncertainty and upholds the principle of diversity and cultural differences. Representation presents itself as an alternative source of real and innate aesthetic activity in human beings, the new biology of the mind, is beginning to be understood as a phenomenon of artistic realization and appreciation. The study of Rabindranath Tagore’s paintings should integrate the concept beyond representation as a meaningful visual invention. A review of the artwork and his practices that make up the characteristics of the creative process, substantiate to the fact how Tagore’s visual practices can be considered as the institution of all significant ‘new’ in modern Indian art.

Rabindranath Tagore is undeniably a great painter excessively than a laureate, a philosopher and his inward painting as another form of intellectual acumen is evidently reflected through his works in the later stages of his life. His self-portraits and paintings are considered as the true representation which is beyond all-conventional aspects of Indian art of the time. Silence is
consequently the core and an outlandish surrealism, extraordinary emotion and
decisive relief marks are the signature of his paintings. He himself told that,

“I remain silent even as my pictures are. It is for them to express and not
to explain.”¹ (Rabindranath Tagore, 1938).

His keen interest in primitive art, the distortion of form, the typical use of
colour and the serenity of the theme are the advanced characters of the ‘new’ in
Indian painting. He made a new way out in representing the reality of life with
his own experience. Sandip Sarkar, in The Last Affair, A Collection of Essays
(edited by Prof. Ratan Parimoo), ‘Rabindranath Tagore’, ‘the sources and the
development of Rabindranath’s Paintings, LKA, New Delhi, 1989), opines that
‘fantasy is one of the important features of Rabindranath Tagore’s paintings’.
Sandip Sarkar says, “Finally the fantasy level of visual has counterparts in
nature. They are real, but expressed informally”.² (Sandip Sarkar 1989.)

Tagore’s paintings in the perspective of modernity are generally related
to his ideas of the Visva-Bharati, and his concept of art has changed
substantially in the later stages. In the first part of the 1920s, Rabindranath
Tagore had infrequently tried to be a painter. He has close to 2,500 paintings,
drawings, and scribbling to his credit which were shown across Europe and Asia
besides different parts of India. The same period saw Tagore’s most perceptive
writings on art and aesthetics, distant from the setup of Kala Bhavan, the
institution of art, his motto of a university and its disciplines of study. For
Tagore, art and aesthetics were not marginal and both were an integral
ingredient of the self to relive the appreciation of beauty in every facet of life
and its progression to the ultimate human harmony. His idea of art education
was lingering with the Jorasanko Thakurbari portraits, the paintings of J.P.
Gangooly based on Banabhatta’s Kadambari and Ravi Varma the exponent whose academic realism as the highest form of art of the time.iii (Rabindranath Tagore, 2005).

It is his notion of a world with no boundaries, where the ideas and knowledge spreads generously, uniformly incorporate, and exchange together. Visva-Bharati established in 1901 carries together intellectuals across the world from different disciplines of study subjects. Tagore retained the basic aspects of the ‘brahmavidyalaya’, dedicated mainly to a curriculum of studies of Indian classics and nature with science and English as marginal subjects. It was to broaden his idea of education to teach all children in secure immediacy of nature to improve their receptivity and he increasingly felt the necessity to absorb it with the power of the world. He said,

‘The study of truth has no borders of the east and the West. My institution will be a pilgrimage of knowledge where the truths will reside’.iv (Ibid, 2005).

Placing himself at a distance from the ‘I and though’ and the expression of nationalism, Tagore affirmed his unique modern aesthetic stance to avoid the political turmoil of the time. Tagore had strongly turned next to the vision of nationalism and the passionate anti-colonialism of the radical and the sensible. His solution was the emergence of a new selfhood in colonial India, viewing the history as a succession of assimilation and its invasion that increasingly broadened its limits. However, he truly sensed that the Indian self would be improved by taking up the Imperial merits, which he expressed in Crisis in Civilization. In Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities, he states that this broader self-application is to eliminate poverty and illiteracy and
setting up the base of a moral society. Accordingly, the self would enhance itself by inclusion from the world and consecutively improve the world. Ganesh Pyne in a conversation with Neville Tuli, an art critic and curator, 1973, said that, “Rabindranath used to create and his tremendous power to ignore the technical riddles of his work” (Tuli Neville, 1997.)

The opening of the twentieth century witnessed a nationalist movement in the field of art well established by Abanindranath and E.B. Havell. The existing Calcutta Art School was based on the fact that it was crucial for the Indian artists to absorb Western representative practices for the growth of Indian art and provoked the cultural necessity for a free advance to the representation of Indian experience. Their manners achieved detection with Havell’s choice to set up Indian art into Calcutta Art School’s art education curriculum and with the innovative instances of Indian art. In support of Havell, Tagore was of the opinion that Indian art should develop not only in connection with Western culture but also with all cultures to enhance its tradition. Rabindranath Tagore stimulated Abanindranath and Nandalal to engage in liberal and regular cultural activities in the higher arts along with the folk and popular art forms, led the Kala Bhavan and the Indian art to the nationalist mission. However, Tagore gained prominence as an artist and his perceptions about art transformed significantly after a visit to the Chicago Art Institute Show with 1600 exhibits in the year 1913 that had the entire range of modern paintings. Tagore also visited the British Museum. He exposed himself to primitive art of the world during his visit to Japan in 1916. He visited Weimer and Bauhaus, Germany in 1921, and congregate with Kollowitz, Modigliani, and Johannes Itten. (Neogy Prithwish, 1726)
Tagore invited Stella Krammrisch to Santiniketan in 1922, where she delivered a succession of world Art from Gothic to Dadaism. Rabindranath translated it later. He progressed in writings and on aesthetics later, as a result Art and Tradition was completed in 1926. Here he articulated that,

“*There was a time when human races lived in comparative segregation and therefore the art adventures had their experience within a narrow range of limit...*” vii (Prithwish Neogy Kolkata: Subarnarekha, 2005).

In the paintings of Tagore, it was replicated and in advances to his art with a moderate stimulation between the different run of the time and made an approach of his own. This ingenious exposure was the idea of personality and harmony of Tagore. Some of his landscape paintings and his self-portrait of 1936 exhibition undeniably exposed impressionist inclination. However, Tagore’s application of colour exposes the eccentricity of his experiment with colour pigments to generate a daring attitude. His absorption for geometrical contours is also exceptional. Infinite deviation of the identical temper in his image making process sustained all over his time. From the earlier to later, the changes happened were from tenderness to theatrical intensity with strong colours in his paintings. Indeed the later paintings had more intensity of darkness, the fantasy and pain expressed lucidly. For Tagore rhythm was an outline of the reality of a creator lived in an eternal world of forms. Tagore elucidates that;

“The only training that I had from my younger days was the training in rhythm, in thought, and the rhythm in sound. I had come to know that rhythm gives reality that is arbitrary and immaterial in it. Firstly, there is the indication
of a line, and then it becomes a form. The more prominences, the form becomes clearer to me”'.viii (Ibid, 2005).

The conception of form, Tagore’s notion is more an organic whole, than an incompatible reality. Tagore liberally experimented with drawing on paper also. Tagore’s ‘canvas’ revealed plurality in possibility of the open edge of cultural qualities. He acknowledged the new advocate of modernism and the need of traditionalism more than that of the contemporaries of the time. Roy (1933) in “Tagore”, Vol. III, notes:

“From the early dawn of our history it has been India’s privilege and also its problem as a host, to harmonize the diverse elements of humanity which have inevitably been brought to our midst, to synthesize contrasting articles in the light of a comprehensive ideal” ix

Rabindranath Tagore and others were busy in their own creative experiments, giving a new diversity to modern Indian painting. He attained his hallowed ending because of a creative expedition, pushed bold by a mind keen to assert that it can certainly absorb whatever there is, his introspective unintentional imagery, which tried to express a sense of liberty. Ratan Parimoo, in his Collection of essays ‘Rabindranath Tagore’: the sources and the development of Rabindranath’s Paintings, LKA, New Delhi, 1989 marked that;

“May be it is the similar frame of mind at work in either case, a mind which ‘feels’ rather than ‘sees’ the reality, where there is no intellectual barrier between the ‘felt’ reality and its visualisation through representation, where the mind, the feeling and the delineating skills fuse into one”. ix (Ratan Parimoo, 1989)
Tagore was attracted to drawing and painting at the age of sixty, a literary of exhibitions of his many works throughout Europe, and participates in protanopia, the colour blindness or partial colour sensitivity in his own style with red-green, an eccentricity in aesthetics and colouring schemes. Tagore pursued frequent mode, included craftwork from northern New Ireland, Haida carvings of west coast of Canada, British Columbia, and woodcuts of Max Pechstein, also had a good handwriting competence, exaggerated scribbles and word layouts in his manuscripts with simple motifs including simple cadenced designs. J. Swaminathan, an artist and thinker expressed in ‘Art Now’ in India produced for the commonwealth Arts Festival, London, 1965 that;

“Tagore’s revolt against tradition in art was an isolated phenomenon and even to this day the significance of his break-through is not fully appreciated ....” ⁷¹ (J. Swaminathan, 1965)

Rabindranath Tagore was generated immense forms and images in his paintings that emerged as comprehensive creativity, from simple doodles to temperate colour experimentation. Creativity lies inside every individual, if only their inner purpose can be cherished to balance and carry on the hand with a permutation of modesty and self-confidence. This point of satisfying a doodle is decisive. It can suit the cause for people to grasp their intrinsic creativity, an aspiration to complete fragmentary forms. In the doodle, a line joins and equilibrium is formed or purposelessness revealed. A few shadings follow, a fragment of apprehension, a new line, may be marginal, new relations link up, make a whole, then to break away, to see it balance, to participate with it, to seek and provide a meaning to it, or to prevent seeming for meaning, to take pleasure in being free from defective meaning, immediately affecting the current. A
rhythm extends and the creative force finds a fresh exit. It infinitely leaves the play within, and so, losing the line, as the speed is constant melting oneself among infinite energies, however constantly only, surfacing a concern and curiosity for all things. Hence, creativity may possibly instigate, from self-assimilation the initial start of a noble work are introduce.

The following paintings of Rabindranath Tagore are selected for the study and assessed that his contribution is a major asset in the modern Indian art scene.

Plate number 1- ‘Nude Woman’: This composition of Rabindranath Tagore is a portrait figure of a half-nude woman in monochromatic scheme and is placed and filled on the centre part of the picture plane. The negative space is assorted with a temperate white and grey hue. This colouring pattern itself creates a depressing mood on the onlooker. This appearance also shares a distrustful stare and soreness of her situation. Patchy and pale tones along with smoky white light, which is falling on her face, sticky hair straight declining on her neck with hardness, and the roaring effect brush-strokes in the lower part of the neck and the breasts, formulates an expressionistic clinch and a romantic feeling of the subject matter by the artist.

Plate number 2 and 3: Rabindranath Tagore’s this two ‘Landscape’ paintings are in clustered greenery of trees close to the undulating mountain spot near the infinite lake with sky ending. Densely gloomy greens against the reddish yellow mountains, and a ground and overcast sky, assimilate Tagore’s notion of representation beyond the real and meaningful visual invention of the subject matter. It is also a reassessment of the nature and the approach of expressing elements in the natural world provides a narration of the visual
dialogue with idealistic impression. This perception of Tagore’s experimentation is considered as one of the conventional kind in modern Indian art scene.

Plate number 4- ‘A Portrait’: This is an excellent example of Rabindranath Tagore’s talent on metaphorical painting. Woman is portrayed in multi-chromatic scheme and is positioned and packed on the picture plane. The background is mixed among an extreme blue-black and light grey tint. No breathing-space is delivered by the artist in this composition, which creates a miserable temper on spectator’s mind. The look of the lady with neck-covered green outfit, sharp nose, elongated lower jaw and the starry eyes also allocates a sort of sceptical stare and pain. Dark intense colour strokes along with greyish yellow lights falling on her face create an impressionistic manifestation and a passionate emotion of the subject matter.

Plate number 5- ‘Mother and Child’: This is a fascinating subject matter of an idealistic artist from the biblical era paintings of the west. Rabindranath Tagore has expressed the ultimate affection of a mother with her child in his painting; gathers an ultimate merit of the subject matter and inspiration. The ‘holy’ child sitting on mother’s lap is depicted in very luminous pale scarlet colour and the mother with deliberate grey design in her yellow sari, which has covered the entire the body of the child to care, resembles the artist’s compassion with the child. Partially abstracted figures in the centre, the background of the painting are hallowed by solid black portion which is situated in a scratched exterior plane giving an obsessive passion.

Plate number 6- The painting ‘A Couple’, here, Rabindranath Tagore has expressed the subject matter of love and affection. A pyramidal arrangement,
among embraced lovers in the centre of the painting in a mystical back-ground of soft blue sky with clouds and trees in the both ends is a reflection of love and affection. For Tagore, art is significant and is an integral ingredient of the self-representation to experience the beauty in every aspect of our life. In this painting, his assimilation of geometrical shape in the pictorial plane, yellow and red drapery with strong brush-strokes of black and pale white outlines, offers a narrative of emotion which is astonishing. Endless variations of temper in his images and subject-matter, from compassion to dramatic passion, he revolutionised his paintings with strong colours. Indeed, this is one of the imperative paintings having more force of bright colour against dark support, which generates a fantasy and compassion together.

Rabindranath Tagore’s Paintings are to be found in an outstanding position and contributed to the major rational trends in modern Indian paintings. The five paintings chosen for the study here set a new paradigm for an innovative inclination and inspiration towards modernity. Deeply intellectual with a secret wisdom of intuitive nature, Rabindranath Tagore is best known for his paintings, as well as for establishing real watchword of an idealist, who interpret new idioms including doodles, water colour and ink-washes. Immense hold on primitive art of Asia, his distortion of forms, the unusual use of colour and the serene of the topic he made an unbroken expedition in art, representing the reality of life beyond representation with his own experience. Rabindranath Tagore has stressed upon the importance of individuality in the entire creative field, so that the artists have to have innovation, challenge and incentive in their work. ‘Mimesis’ conceptually, is negative in the sense it speaks more of what modern Indian art is not. Similarly, an evolution from pre-modern inclination in
art making in India that comes in little proximal vocabulary with mimetic notion of art to the problem of abstraction, representation, and reality parallel to the existing world of facts and events in art making. In the final aspect, paintings of Rabindranath Tagore in modern Indian art scene closely reflects to the notion of art as discourse, where there takes place an interpretative consideration of the reality. Tagore’s paintings are not merely representations of reality but are creations, beyond the concept of reality with a blend of forms, content and composition visualised through his own wisdom and self-determination that place him as a master in the modern Indian painting.

Sarkar Sandip “In his The Last Affair, Collection of essays” (ed), Prof. Ratan Parimoo), ‘Rabindranath Tagore’, ‘the sources and the development of Rabindranath’s Paintings, LKA, New Delhi, 1989.


Neogy Prithwish, Rabindranath Tagore, in “Art and Tradition” (1726)


Plate No. 2 and 3
A Portrait

Plate No. 4
A Couple

Plate No. 6