Chapter I

Introduction

In the Being of God, in whose image and likeness man was made.

- Thomas Aquinas

‘Mimesis’ is an ancient and complex concept, owing allegiance to the Greek tradition from the time of Plato who, along with Aristotle, laid down the foundations of what is considered an important debate in Western philosophy and aesthetics. It originated in the Greek word ‘mimesthai’ meaning ‘imitation’, which itself is a derivative of ‘mimos’, which means ‘to mime’. Almost every contemporary Western thinker of any impact has engaged with the idea of mimesis. It began with a Platonic concern about educating young people and politics, and mimesis was quickly drawn into discussions on politics, aesthetics, metaphysics, art, realism, truth, and objectivity. In fact, mimesis has references to such a vast conceptual apparatus that it has been referred to as a ‘thematic complex’ (Gebauer and Wulf 1995).

Mimesis was used initially to delineate and discuss the relation between nature and art but over time it was drawn into examining the relation between art works themselves, as also between artworks and reality (Spariosu 1984). In this sense, mimesis concerned the relation between the artwork, which is always derivative, and some ‘original’, either nature or reality, however defined. Artworks, especially the dramato-poetic genres which were common at that time in Greece, were therefore considered imitative to the second and even third degree, according to Plato. This notion of mimesis, namely art as imitation of reality has been a persistent theme in western art history and its intellectual traditions. In this dissertation, it is explored as a foundational concept in the arts, in contemporary culture as well as in issues connected with pedagogy, such as plagiarism and rote-learning.

1 It is important to mention here that before Plato, this tie between the artwork and something empirical did not always exist. As Halliday points out, ‘the prePlatonic material does not uniformly imply that the object or model of a mimetic entity need be either particular or actual, as opposed to a type, general or universal substance, or an imaginary, hypothetical state of affairs’ (Halliday 2002: 16).

2 Imitation of the first degree for Plato was nature as an imitation of ideal Form; second degree was art as an imitation of nature; and third degree was art as an imitation of another (artistic) object.
The genealogy of this dissertation lies in my confronting plagiarism among students when I began to teach university students in 2010. As a researcher, I believed in, and practiced, the norms of the academia which were against intellectual plagiarism, but I had never examined its foundations. As a student of anthropology, I knew that all human learning, enculturation and socialization depend upon the human being’s ability to imitate to no small extent. Not just in teaching-learning the daily, mundane activities of living but even teaching-learning language, art and different forms of ‘culture’ are all dependent upon this instinct and ability to imitate. As a teacher in a communications school, when I read assignment after assignment of ‘plagiarized’ assignments, I realized that plagiarism is but one manifestation of a completely innocuous and important impetus in human beings which is to imitate or copy someone or something.

The problem of plagiarism has been compounded by teachers in contemporary education, who have migrated unreflexively into the paradigm of ‘self-directed learning’ and ‘independent learners’. Rather than naively reflecting back the notes dictated by teachers in classrooms in their exams and assignments under the older paradigm of content-based teaching-learning, students now trawled the internet to copy and paste material in newer versions of plagiarism under the new paradigm of ‘self-directed learning’ and ‘independent learners’. It was inevitable that one would become skeptical about the desirability and feasibility of these new paradigms. Another new idea in contemporary education is that of ‘processing’ knowledge. In contemporary views on education, pedagogy is not concerned with the ‘transfer’ of information from teacher to students as much as it was about teaching students to ‘process’. If the ‘banking’ concepts of knowledge had been prevalent in the older content-based paradigm, it now has been replaced by the idea of knowledge as ‘construction’ in the new ‘process’ oriented paradigm of learning. Furthermore, banking concepts of knowledge were excessively predicated on ideas of knowledge as a body of information, which could be transmitted to young people who, in turn, memorized it and made it amenable for easier ‘testing’. The idea of education as something which is poured into the brain, as if through a funnel, was defunct; newer ideas of education teased out and built upon pre-existing knowledge in order to enhance the tacit knowledge of young people. There was a revolution happening, particularly in elementary education around India.

When we put together the ideas of processing knowledge and the requirement that students construct it themselves from the cognitive, social and learning levels that students are at, it followed that each time what is constructed needed more direct facilitation by a teacher than is
normally believed, and each time it is taught anew. Thus, it would be more accurate to phrase this idea of ‘processing’ knowledge in terms of the ‘co-construction of knowledge’. This idea of ‘co-construction’ implied greater parity between students and teacher while making knowledge something new to be built and discovered afresh, even for the teacher, in collaboration with students and with each new group of students.

But the task of doing this was a daunting one within a pedagogical context in a university. How could teachers manage this mammoth task when confronted with large, inclusive classrooms, less than optimal pedagogical support and young people who couldn’t, and didn’t, want to read or write even at the university level and seemed determined, if not destined, only to plagiarize? There was a need to go back to something far more basic about education and pedagogy, about learning and comprehension. What is involved in meaning-making, for instance? More questions arose than could be answered. But in many ways, they could all be traced back to the concept of imitation. Although the term was not used in a paper exploring plagiarism in the classroom (Nayak 2011), I later learned that ‘mimesis’ was the foundation of the ideas put forward there.

Entranced by the idea of mimesis and seeing possibilities in it for theorizing about pedagogy, I formulated my PhD dissertation proposal on ‘Mimesis in Contemporary Culture: Implications for Pedagogy’. The objectives of the dissertation were as follows:

1. To get a conceptual understanding of the current Western ideas of mimesis
2. To understand Indian formulations of mimesis
3. To explore the interrelationships between mimesis and contemporary Indian culture
4. To examine the implications of the above on teaching practices in the Indian context

There are two parts to the dissertation: Part 1 is on the conceptual configurations (and re-configurations) of mimesis and Part 2 is on the pedagogical implications. In the first part, which includes Chapters II-IV, the ‘thematic complex’ of mimesis is located in western philosophy and thought, and unpacked through a historical exegesis. Thus, Chapter II explores mimesis and its avatars across the centuries in western thought, as I have been able to access them through a diachronic study of their occurrence in secondary textual literature in English. These comprise the concept of what I refer to as ‘historical mimesis’. The many formulations of mimesis in the
western tradition, starting with Plato, are summarized, although the history goes further back to the oral, Homeric tradition which I also discuss in the context of the written one. The concept of mimesis changes as it gets differently appropriated across time. We see that the simple idea of what I call ‘mimesis-as-imitation’ mutates, so to speak, in extraordinary ways and becomes far broader, deeper and more complex. Despite what would appear to be a simple repetition of sameness, as Muckelbauer points out, ‘speaking historically, imitation seems to have had a rather difficult time representing itself’ (Muckelbauer 2003: 2). There were at least six major ways we have been able to isolate in the journey of mimesis across the centuries, from antiquity to modernity.

In the course of this study, I learned that although many writers and thinkers tend to use mimesis in the sense of ‘imitation’, and make out that this is the whole meaning of it, this synecdochal relation is misguided, if not entirely an error, and limits our pedagogical explorations. For instance, the limited view of ‘mimesis-as-imitation’ may give rise to strong negative views in education about stifled intellect, passive students, lack of originality, plagiarism, rote-learning and the like. But when we look at the historical development of mimesis, we see that it is much more than only imitation – which, in any case, was more a Platonic view of mimesis whereby art (and other kinds of knowledge) was seen as a mirror of reality. We see that Aristotle understood mimesis in an almost contradictory way and argued that rather than mirroring reality or nature, mimesis mirrored ourselves: it had an inner logic which we, as viewers, listeners, spectators, could re-cognize. What I call ‘mimesis-as-creation’ was thus born where, rather than reflecting reality or nature, mimesis reflected our cognitive structures and inner self.

With the birth and spread of the Roman Empire, the ancient Greeks were looked at as worthy of being ‘models’ for subsequent generations. If art was an imitation of reality, reality was located in the past as the source of high achievements in the arts. This belief helped ‘mimesis-as-emulation’ to come into being, culminating in the Renaissance when mimesis transformed itself again and, drawing upon a concurrent rise in the importance of rhetoric, became acutely aware of ‘saying the same thing in different ways’. This pointed to the existence of at least two, and sometimes even multiple, ‘realities’ referred to by art. Thus did ‘mimesis-as-imitatio’ arise, in turn giving rise to the genres of satire, parody and the like. Another form of mimesis, ‘mimesis-as-copia’, also simultaneously arose, again drawing from rhetorical traditions
and had profound consequences on making mimesis more dynamic as it focused upon ideas of transformation of the same reality through rhetorical devices such as *inventio* (selection), *dispositio* (organizing, sequencing) and *elocutio* (expression). Thus, new realities could be created from the same original merely through re-ordering its constitutive elements. Another important element of mimesis-as-*copia* was embellishment or ornamentation which again created differences, but from the one and same reality.

With western Enlightenment, the scope of such rhetorical mimesis was reduced, owing to the birth of science, rationality and its demands for precise language. An overarching concept for mimesis in modernity beginning with western Enlightenment was ‘mimesis-as representation’. Ironically, with the rise of postmodernism, there has been a plethora of what Derrida would call ‘iterations’ of mimesis, some of which we encounter in Chapter III.

Postmodernity is glossed over in this dissertation as my period of study ends with modernity. However, a summary of the main ideas of postmodernism are given as a historical background for the sake of completion. A few of the postmodern and contemporary ideas and writers are highlighted for the reader through this discussion, as well as in the thematic discussion in Chapter III. The key point to note is that in postmodernism, rather than having art imitating reality in one or other way, as described above, reality began to imitate art. Images became so important in a media-perfused world that the medium was the message, as Marshall McLuhan pointed out. More significantly, for our purposes, the medium *became* the reality in a neat flip of historical mimesis.

Thus, we can see from this brief summary above, that mimesis continuously reinvented and transformed itself, from the time of antiquity in the western tradition.

At the end of this historical exegesis of western ideas on mimesis, the question occurred to me, located as an ‘Indian’, about the place of mimesis in Indian thought and culture. Although trying to find Indian equivalents of essentially Western concepts was a phase in the history of India immediately after independence, this kind of search implies a rootedness in colonial mentality and structures of thinking and their validation. The brief foray into Indian concepts therefore is not to be seen as an attempt at comparative aesthetics but one to make the literature a bit more indicatory, exploratory and inclusive, perhaps even pointing to new directions for research. The section on Indian traditions is not comprehensive by any stretch of the imagination, and a lot more needs to be done in this area, especially with regard to its implications for
pedagogy. In addition, there is still a dearth of easily accessible secondary material in English on Indian thought, especially in comparison with the material in Western literature in English, which itself has drawn upon the Greek, Latin and Arabic intellectual traditions. Rather than looking for mimesis in Indian literature, which requires a special competence, some key work on the dramatic and visual arts was explored, along with the oral tradition of education in ancient India, in the Hindu as well as Buddhist Sanskritic traditions.

In Chapter III, the implications of historical mimesis are set out through a discussion of two important themes arising from the conceptual overview of the notion of art as an imitation of reality, namely what is the real, what is the original and consequently, what is art? The role of conventions in influencing various art forms became evident.

In Chapter IV, contemporary culture is explored to see the manifestations of mimesis. They give rise to a different understanding, not only from the esoteric historical forms and arena explored in Chapter II, but also in the vernacular, more emic or actor-oriented forms. These forms are not components of conceptual mimesis but are mechanisms associated with mimesis. I look for what I call ‘mimetic impulses’ or the faculty to imitate or copy which is prevalent in different arena. These mimetic impulses are largely action-oriented, always ‘doing’ something. Seven different kinds of mimetic impulses in the vernacular are highlighted in a typology of sorts generated from my purview of five contemporary domains. These include mirroring, repeating, substituting, juxtaposing, emulating, re-producing and re-presenting. The five main domains looked at are mimicry, Indian contemporary dance, contemporary music, Indian classical music and yoga.

The survey indicates how deeply mimesis is embedded in the larger world, and gives an idea of the range of arena where mimesis is found and, more pertinently, the more recognizable forms they are found in today. These arena, and ‘mimetic impulses’, are closer to what young people may be interested in and respond to and were thus considered important to engage with. Repetition turns out to be a key mimetic impulse here too. The typology of mimetic impulses is important since it helps us recognize the vernacular ways in which mimesis speaks, apart from its classical formulations as outlined in Chapter II. In other words, this chapter makes the esoteric concept of mimesis more familiar and amenable for applying in education.
The second part of the dissertation is the section on pedagogical implications of mimesis and consists of Chapters V, VI and VII. Chapter V takes us into education and is divided into four sections: In the first section, the implications of historical mimesis are explored such as how *mythos*, *praxis* and *copia* can be used by teachers, how can plagiarism be understood in a more nuanced fashion to better guide pedagogical support that students need, what are the implications of mimesis on rote-learning and how can our knowledge of ancient Indian oral traditions, as well as Dewey, generate a critique of the denigration of rote-learning. It was only in the Indian oral traditions that the persistence of the mimetic impulse of ‘repetition’ is discovered, pointing to a similarity with the Homeric tradition discussed in Chapter II. It arose again in Chapter IV in the section on vernacular notions of mimesis. Repetition was so interesting and complex and so integrally tied with education that it became key in the mimetic pedagogy developed in Chapter VII. There is also a section on new conventions of using film as a pedagogical aid in the classroom.

Chapter VI discusses some contemporary ideas on education so as to give some background on this field. It summarizes ideas like process-based learning and self-directed learning, explores the idea of thinking itself before using Bloom’s taxonomy to delineate critical and creative thinking to use in the mimetic pedagogy developed in Chapter VII. This chapter also puts forward the importance of shifting from ‘making meaning’ to ‘making interpretations’ as a way to make pedagogy more ‘constructivist.’ The basics of semiotics and its connections with mimesis and representation are also accorded attention.

Chapter VII deals in detail with another implication of historical mimesis which is an indicatory but systematic pedagogy that is developed using the framework of ‘pictorial mimesis’. The framework of a new ‘Mimetic Pedagogy’ is laid out. Predominantly, basic semiotic concepts are used in the conceptual framework. Thus, denotation and connotation, paradigm, syntagm, and intertextuality are briefly explained as part of the conceptual framework and also illustrated as conceptual ‘tools’ through the use of specific examples. The idea of ‘pictorial mimesis’ is developed based upon ideas of repetition, mimesis-as-*imitatio* and mimesis-as-*copia* as the analytical framework for my innovative pedagogy. In the first part of the pedagogy, the mimetic impulse of repetition is used by making it dynamic through the use of substitution, in order to actively teach students to be critical and creative thinkers. This draws from an understanding of oral traditions as well as the culture of classical and contemporary music as shown in Chapter IV.
and Chapter V. The second part of the pedagogy uses mimesis-as-imitatio which is made dynamic through juxtaposing and intertextuality. In the third part of the pedagogy which is dedicated to creative thinking but really needs the first two parts to make it complete and comprehensive, mimesis-as-copia is used and made dynamic through embellishing/ornamenting to make it practically useable. The pedagogy is an indicatory one, used as a pilot in two post-graduate courses and partially used in three master’s level thesis under my guidance. Some of the visuals used have been selected by the students themselves, as part of their own larger thesis, and have been acknowledged as they arise in the dissertation. The visuals illustrate the ways in which they can be used in teaching critical and creative thinking. The ‘Mimetic Pedagogy’ is only an indicatory pedagogical framework and would need to be further developed.

Chapter VIII is the concluding part of my dissertation.

A note on method

This dissertation has been written using the methodological approach followed in the humanities, particularly philosophy. There is no separate chapter on methodology. The dissertation may be seen as addressing the broader question of the philosophical basis of plagiarism, rote-learning, and learning in general, through conceptual analysis of both the etic and emic forms of mimesis. The etic or universal formulation of mimesis has been ‘imitation’. The methodology breaks up each component of the title and critically analyzes it. Rather than defining what mimesis means (or selecting one meaning from among the several formulations it has), we look at as many distinct formulations within the Greek and Roman historical traditions that could be found in the secondary literature as indicated above. A historical exegesis, or what is called a diachronic analysis, thus revealed the variety of formulations hidden by this one dominant formulation of ‘mimesis-as-imitation’, as we see in Chapter II.

In Chapter IV, ‘emic analysis’ is used in order to find out the vernacular and popular forms of mimesis in contemporary culture, and to see how this concept is animated now in a variety of distinct formulations. We see that historical mimesis had essentially worked through mirroring, repeating, substituting, juxtaposing, emulating, re-producing and re-presenting. Five main domains where one or other of these forms occurs are examined, to see how they work in each of them: mimicry, contemporary dance, contemporary music, classical music and yoga. Each of these domains of contemporary culture can no doubt be researched in depth, but the
purpose of this chapter was to locate recognizable forms of historical mimesis to show its pervasiveness in contemporary culture in their more vernacular forms.

In Chapter VII, the mimetic pedagogy, which is indicatory, is developed based upon empirical data generated in the classroom in the teaching of two post-graduate courses: Cultural Studies and Creative Communication. The students were taught basic semiotics and applied work was given in the course on Cultural Studies. Three of the students subsequently did their MS thesis based upon this classroom teaching, which was further developed using analytical methods taught to them. Similarly, the course on Creative Communication generated the data used to develop the pedagogy of creative thinking. However, the systematic pedagogy described in this dissertation has been developed largely during the writing of this dissertation, filling in many of the revealed gaps in teaching-learning through a process of reflexivity. The theorization of the pedagogy in terms of ‘pictorial mimesis’ has also been entirely done during this time.