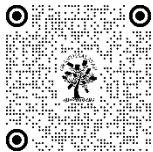


DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPT OF MORALITY FROM PHILOSOPHICAL CONTENT INTO CRITIQUE OF SATIRE IN INDIAN ART

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ABSTRACT

The development of the concept of satire holds an important place in the philosophical content of Indian art as it has transformed in several ways reflecting the socio-cultural and political changes. Satire has been voiced in Indian art over the years through its varied expressions that are crucial to understanding the hidden content of commentary or the overtly implied motives of satire in different art forms. The purpose of my research is to explore two interdependent concepts, first, the kinship of satire to the concept of Indian moral philosophy; and second, the reflection of moral philosophy through varied expressions of satire in Indian art. Morality has had deep roots in Indian philosophy since ancient times. The moral and ethical framework of philosophy revolves around the concept of 'Dharma' that holds immense importance in the philosophical foundation of different schools such as Jainism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. It is also central to the metaphysical identity of the Indian culture that aims to foster ethical conduct through righteousness and justice. Indian art has evolved through the ages as a reflection of society and its influence on the formation of culture and values. Teachings of morality have been integral to the Indian culture rather than the biting language of satire that found its expressions in Indian art around the later stages of development, that is around the medieval period when a deeper inflow of foreign influence began entering the Indian cultural system. I aim to understand the evolution of morality from the ancient period progressing toward the critical harsh mockery of satire in contemporary Indian art.

Keywords: Satire, Moral Philosophy, Dharma, Morality, Socio-Political Commentary, Indian Art

1. INTRODUCTION

The wonders of philosophical statements in the themes of Indian paintings bloom from influences related to emotions and values that are integral to the core of Indian culture. The visual vocabulary of these paintings is at times symbolic of hidden connotations that spring from the deep roots of the Indian essence of aesthetics and beauty. The true meaning of beauty according to Indian philosophy reflects the purity of the soul, which represents the transcendental aspect of self-realization leading towards the ultimate reality, '*Brahman*' (Lewis & Cohn-Sherbok,

2016, p.125). This metaphysical approach by Indian philosophy can be observed in the Sanskrit phrase, "Satyam Shivam Sundaram" conveying the idea of truth, divinity, and beauty being deeply intertwined in the fabrics of our existence. The rich and varied traditions of historic Indian paintings educate the viewer about these unique ways of seeing life with inspirations of moral conduct and righteous behavior to provoke inner thought for introspection. Living within the framework of society expects us as human beings certain code of conduct that aims at the welfare of others, conceptually stated as morality (Prasad, 2009, p.2). The foundation pillars of the structure of ethics in Indian Philosophy are the statehood of 'Dharma' and 'Karma'. Amongst its other meanings, Dharma also stands for moral merit (Prasad, 2008, p.4) which can be observed as the essence of Indian paintings created during the classical and medieval periods. My research in this paper aims to analyze the evolution of the concept of morality or 'Dharma' reflected in Indian paintings that have evolved into the critical approach of satire in contemporary Indian paintings.

2. METHOD AND MATERIAL

Using a qualitative approach, a broad analysis of Indian paintings reflecting the evolution of morality and satire will be done based on a timeline reflecting the ancient, classical, medieval, modern, and contemporary periods in Indian art. This paper focuses on the essence of the kinship between satire and moral philosophy echoed as a socio-political commentary in Indian Art.

3. DISCUSSION

The Kinship of Moral Philosophy and Satire can be observed in their similar role of critiquing, and pointing to the flaws in societal norms and governing systems that influence holistic development and growth. Aspects such as imparting instructions and formulating analysis based on actions needing reform are also common features in moral philosophy and satire. They both serve as impeccable tools of social commentary with the primary purpose of eradicating folly and bringing about the required change. Moral satire and moral philosophy share a close boundary with likenesses in their focuses, structure, and practical value (Diehl, 2013, p.317). The interconnection between satire and morality is strengthened because of the commonness of the roles played by them and their shared objective of examining and shaping moral values but, differences in their functioning arise from their natural characteristics.

Figure 1



Figure 1 Temptation of the Buddha, northern gate, Sanchi, red sandstone.

Source (Wikipedia contributors, 2017)

Morality is deeply embedded in the roots of Indian philosophy that has at times been beautifully reflected in Indian art. Ajanta cave paintings representing the Jataka stories are narratives on the previous lives of Buddha emphasizing moral lessons related to compassion, humility, and virtue highlighting social responsibility (MAP Academy, 2023). The philosophy denoting the moral aspects of life promotes inner transformation that ultimately aims for self-realization and liberation from the life cycle of birth and death. Teachings on morality stating virtuous conduct in life and social responsibility have from time immemorial been addressed by different religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism, thus, becoming integral to the cultural essence of India. While moral philosophy bears close affinity, satire has seldom been implied or was rather less common a subject in the teachings of Indian philosophy. Subtlety has always persisted with the use of satiric expressions in early Indian art. There are instances in ancient and classical Indian art that were closer in timeline to the existence of moral philosophy where comedy, humor, and exaggeration are implied to ridicule, comment, or provoke thought, rather than biting mockery and the sharp sting of satire. There are varied aspects of satire that are used as powerful expressions for symbolic representations of ridiculing vice and folly in human behavior. Matthew Hodgart defines satire as a mode of derision that uses "ridicule, sarcasm, irony, etc. to oppose, attack, or deride vices, follies, etc" (Hodgart, 1969, p.10). At times, satire delivers social commentary using different techniques of expressions such as ridicule, laughter, wit, comedy, exaggeration, distortion, parody, sarcasm, lampoon, irony, and humor to engage the viewers in a display of content that is appealing and accessible leading to better receptivity by the audience. These relative expressions of satire are parameters to analyze and interpret the satiric content in any art form. Indian art of ancient and classical periods displays examples of varied expressions of satire that present social commentary as a powerful tool of communication hidden within structures presented. The frieze depicting '*Temptation of the Buddha*' from the northern gateway of Sanchi Stupa uses distortion and parody giving a comic effect that can be interpreted as a satiric comment on the attempts of temptation made by the demon Mara and his daughters to distract Buddha from his path of attaining enlightenment (Partha Mitter, 1997, p.137).

Figure 2



Figure 2 Cat Practicing the Penance of Five Fires. Arjuna's Penance, Mahabalipuram, Granite, 29 m x 13 m, 7th to 8th century A.D

Source (Kaimal, 1994, p.19)

Another example of a subtle tone of satire as an expression of commentary can be observed in the details of the large relief at Mahabalipuram also referred to as '*The Descent of Ganges*'. Amidst the richly carved boulder is a narrative depiction of a "Cat Practicing the Penance of Five Fires". A figure of an imitative cat is placed right under the image of Bhagiratha. The emancipated cat resembles the ribbed cage, deep in the meditation image of Bhagiratha. Padma Kaimal, in her article, "*Playful Ambiguity and Political Authority in the Large Relief at Māmallapuram*," states that firstly the satiric cat is suggestive of its true nature and contradicts the vegetarian appearance of the ascetic, secondly, another interpretation argues of political mockery of the authority that commissioned the artwork (Kaimal, 1994, p.19).

Satire as a form of critical commentary and critique originated as a concept in ancient Greece where political figures and people in power were ridiculed and mocked for their flaws, while the term 'satire' originated and developed in Rome (Declercq, 2021, p.9). Initially, satire was a distinct form of literary genre with artistic expression. Satire has evolved and adapted to different cultures, to address a wide range of subjects from the social, political, and moral domains. Sharing alike views as moral philosophy, satire holds a mirror to the flaws and follies to provoke thought entertainingly. Foundations for the literary genre of satire were laid and strengthened by the Roman satirical writers such as Horace, born in the 1st century BCE, and Juvenal in the 1st and 2nd century BCE (Renner, 2014, p.377). Horace's satire had a light-hearted tone of humor implied with wit and gentle mockery without being aggressively harsh in criticism while Juvenal's satire was directed with a caustic tone of aggression. He is widely acknowledged for scathing the moral decay of Roman society with invective anger and outrage. The development of satire as an indistinct field of study successfully made explorations in the West during the early periods of history. As the West is credited for the development of satire, India has contributed to the evolution of moral philosophy that has had an extensive and complex historical background. From being traced back to the Vedic period it was a part of the Upanishadic period, integral to the Buddhist and Jain Traditions, to the classical philosophical period that explored the metaphysical, later finding its place in the medieval period. Teachings of moral philosophy in India have shaped the cultural background of the country. The metaphysical and spiritual culture of India is reflected in the philosophical traditions of morality that emphasize the significance of ethics, virtue, and, righteousness for a content life.

To attain sorrowlessness is the ultimate goal of all the different schools of Indian philosophy (Goodwin, 1955, p.322), the statehood of which is called *moksha*. *Moksha* refers to the ultimate liberation which is freedom from the bondage of life and death. When the ultimate goal of all philosophies in India is to attain liberation from the cycle of life then how does morality attain an important place in the spirit of Indian philosophy? Morality plays a significant role in attaining the ultimate goal of *moksha*. It presents an ethical foundation for individuals by inspiring them to adhere to virtuous conduct, ethical living, and righteousness in behavior. Once the individual is set on an ethical life, their foundations become stronger to pursue higher truths. Morality is deeply aligned with the principles of *karma* and *dharma*. A morally upright life connects with ethical grounding and emphasizes interconnectedness. As morality encourages a deeper engagement with society, offering critical thinking based on moral questions, satire according to the philosophies and culture of the West plays an integral part in educating the audience through social commentary and reflection on the culture, distinctively challenging the authority with its expressions.

The different historical periods in India conveyed moral lessons and teachings through the language of art, illustrating ethical dilemmas and virtues with religious epics and narratives, contributing immensely to the moral and ethical cultural discourse of their times. There was a brilliance in the subtlety of expression they employed for expressing virtues of morality and ethics, with its principal elements residing in humor and comedy. The comic sentiment in India is understood and experienced as a funny element, that arises when the emotions of love, sorrow, and courage when represented are unsuccessful in producing the corresponding rasas as tragic, heroic, and amorous (Siegel, 1989, p.8). The ancient *Hasya Rasa* is an example of the aesthetic sentiment of comedy in the Indian context. This subtlety in expressing morality has over the long years of history transformed into the sarcastic language of satire that uses ridicule and biting mockery to draw the viewer's attention towards socio-political shortcomings, challenging hypocrisy in power. The Indian culture has witnessed the presence of satire in the literature and oral traditions of India since its longstanding history. Still, its integration into the field of visual art has progressed over time from subtle moral teachings in early history to critical depictions of satire in contemporary art.

Figure 3

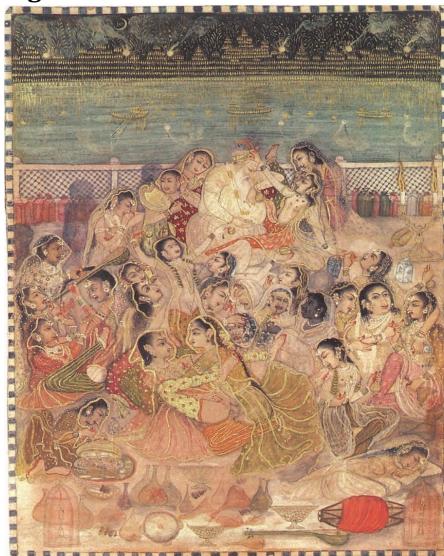


Figure 3 By the light of the Moon and Fireworks. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 21.8 x 15.6 cm, circa 1740.

Source (Welch, 1988, p.372)

The rich traditions of India, such as storytelling along with foreign influences contributed significantly to the development of satire as a distinct field of critical expression. Influencing powers such as the Sultans and Mughals introduced not unique styles and techniques of paintings but also a completely different culture that altered the socio-political life altogether. Satire expressed through humor and sexual explicitness was a theme more frequently depicted in Rajput art than the Mughal (Welch, 1988, p.372) an example of which can be seen in the miniature painting titled "By the light of the Moon, and Fireworks", attributed to Nihal Chand of Kishangarh. Navina Najat Haider in her article "Satire and Humor in Kishangarh Painting" states that the humorous mode in paintings from the Kishangarh school was often created with the intent to convey a moral instruction with an informative narrative (2000, p. 78). Central to the painting is the drunken elderly figure of a Mughal nobleman surrounded by several intoxicated women, a scene depicting the

sociable immoralities and happenings in the Mughal zenana (Haider, 2000, p. 85). The interesting feature of this Kishangarh painting is that it satirizes the follies of the Mughal subjects with unrestrained illustrations of women of the courtly culture.

Painting created on subjects imparting moral knowledge is central to Indian painting. A Pahari miniature series titled "Karni-Bharni" reflects the Indian fundamental concept of individuals creating their destiny based on the actions performed. The painting can be translated as, "As you sow, so shall you reap" emphasizing personal responsibility and accountability. This sketch is one from a set of three accomplished compositional drawings narrating a theme that was popular in northern and western India between the 15th and 19th centuries (Ahuja, 2014, p.13). The grotesque imagery of the sketch affirms the importance of morality and ethics in conduct. The courtly culture of India has produced several artworks commentating on the socio-political scenario incorporating different expressions of satire. A classic example of the representation of satire in art can be seen in the Kalighat paintings that represented the strong impact of British control along with the evolving social scenario in Bengal, arising with the diminishing culture of the courts in India. The portrayal of moral decay through satire and visual idiom was the prime focus of these paintings which adapted well to the new socio-religious demand (Jain, 1999, p.12).

Figure 4



Figure 4 Karni-bharni. Brush drawing on paper, 22 x 32 cm, early to mid -18th century

Source (Ahuja, 2014, p.13)

Representation of satire in the modern era of Indian paintings can be seen in the exploration of a wide range of subjects using the language of critique, question, and reflection on contemporary issues and realities. The narrative paintings by artist Bhupen Khakkar deeply trace taboos and societal norms oppressing sexuality, a theme that he boldly expressed and explored in his paintings using a satirical edge. Other significant contributions to satire in art made by artists of the modern and contemporary era are Sudhir Patwardhan, Pushmala N., Nalini Malani, and others. Contemporary Indian art consistently portrays morality and ethics through the lens of social commentary focusing on social and political satire. The Indian artists projecting critique through their art employ diverse mediums and styles using humor, irony, parody, grotesque imagery, and, caricature to provoke thought. Satire in contemporary Indian art is represented through many different platforms such

as mixed media installations, artificial intelligence, illustrations, political cartoons, street art, digital art, and social media. Celebrated contemporary Indian artist Atul Dodiya is widely accepted for working in diverse styles including elements of satire in his subjects that are often interpreted as satirical slants and commentary.

Figure 5

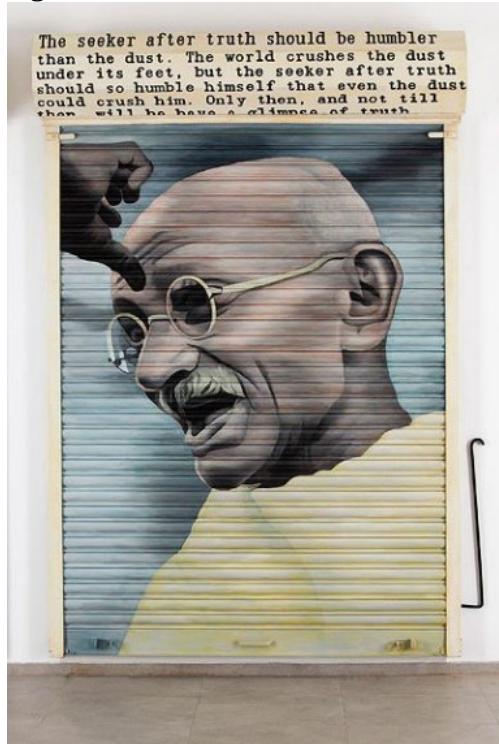


Figure 5 Shutter Series Paintings

Source (Pin on Modern and Contemporary Indian Art, n.d.)

One of his most iconic works expressing social critique and satire is the “Shutter series” of paintings which was a commissioned work carried out as a response to the curfews implemented across the city as a result of the Mumbai riots in the 1990's (Nair, 2020). Dodiya created some works as a response to the deep dejection of the 2002 Gujarat riots that orchestrated a massacre against the Muslim community in the minority. The artist expressed the extreme pain and misery that gloomed over his city and the birthplace of Mahatma Gandhi, who is revered as the epitome of self-sacrifice, humility, and compassion. Dodiya commentates and satirizes the brutality of the massacre at Gujarat which was the home city that preached Gandhis' philosophy of non-violence which was India's long-subscribed approach for such a long period.

The young talent and its creative output in contemporary Indian art are emerging as a result of the powerful intersection of Artificial intelligence, social media platforms, digital mediums, and creativity. They are experimenting with style transfer and generative art exploring visual compositions through artificial intelligence and exhibiting on digital and social platforms. Satire and social commentary are more than ever reflected through such platforms as artists are all the more so concerning themselves with the gripping concerns of society contributing towards art as activism. Samyukta Madhu Aka, a young contemporary Indian artist satirizes the status of Indian women in the current scenario of the

country to powerful projections of female supremacy in the images of mother goddess Kali in her digital series titled “Kali”.

4. CONCLUSION

The concept of Indian satire has evolved and adapted to the changing socio-political scenario of the country throughout different periods of history. The concept of morality and ethics has been a recurring theme throughout the shift in expression from the representation of moral teachings in art to biting, harsh, and, critical language of satire. The historical periods of India such as ancient, classical, medieval, modern, and contemporary have witnessed the transformation of articulating morality through subtle renderings to piercing critique. This evolution in representing morals reflects the enormous change in the socio-political environment commentating on the world around them to bring about the required change and progress through prevailing challenges, offering a lens for introspection.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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