



## Integration of multiple forms in contemporary Nepali arts

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### Abstract

Contemporary Nepali arts integrate contents, forms and techniques of arts from multiple cultures and countries. They reconcile western forms and native Nepali creative traditions. Such ambivalent attitude creates native varieties contemporary context. The appropriation of multiple forms presents visual inter-textuality in the artworks. The artworks also blur the boundary of various art genres like poetry, photography, theatre, painting, sculpture and music. The works present inter- art relationship and intertextuality of multiple disciplines and genres of arts. Contents and forms from different cultures are apparent in Nepali arts. Such cross-currents encounter and interact to creating new forms. Due to the presence of multiple voices, their significance is plural. Globalization has brought fleeting, and ever-changing art influences unsettling representational modes in creativity. Intertextual and intergeneric arts have blurred the boundaries of cultures and creations. Hindu and Buddhist myths and traditions have been visually presented with western techniques and forms. The cross-cultural interflow provides a sense of strange aesthetic pleasure.

### Keywords

Appropriation, ambivalence, contemporary Nepali art, intertextuality.

### Introduction

Early Nepali paintings and sculptures are referential and representational. They represent mythical contents and ideas and events of the world. The works represent the characters of the Hindu and Buddhist mythologies. These compositions are narrative, mystical and didactic. These arts are worshipped like the divinity. The artists were guided by the religious iconography. After the mid twentieth century, there is transformation in Nepali arts in terms of forms and techniques. Nepali artists encountered various western art techniques and forms due to the end of the Rana regime. Nepali artists encountered alien art techniques through the means of transportation and communication. They were fascinated by impressionist's rough texture and fragmented lines, expressionist's altered figures and colors, cubist's geometric shapes, surrealist's dreamlike images and symbols, and abstract forms. These western forms break away from objective and referential representations of things. This provides the unique opportunity to the creator to express their inner feelings and imagination in visual form. Referential native art forms interacted with subjective western art forms.

Early Nepali paintings are symbolic, anthropomorphic and narrative. They attempt to present the resolution of the dualities of the self and the other. Religion and philosophy are the foundation of early artworks. Spirituality and worldliness are complementary in Nepali culture (Ray, 1967). Buddhism and Hinduism, religious and secular elements, life and art are

enter-twined these works (Ray, 1967). The artworks are worshipped as icons of deity. The existence of transcendental and celestial concepts convey a sense of purgatory (Brown, 1912). The artworks inspire awe and adoration along with pleasure.

The divine figures are “created in the image of man... just as each human being is capable of both kindness and anger” (Pal, 1975, *Nepal* 12). The “youthful figures” deities present the “vibrant sap of life” (Ray, 1967, p.14). The miniature illustrations are found in *Prajnaparamita* and *Pancaraksa* manuscripts. *Prajnaparamita* manuscript, dated 1054, presents pictures from Buddha's life, figures of Prajnaparamita and bodhisattvas. Siddhartha Gautam's nativity, meditation, temptation of Mara, the miracle of the snake, taming mad elephant and *mahaparinirvana* are the scenes from Buddha's life. The pictures narrate the story (Sharma, 2009). Immediately, after the birth, Buddha walks his first seven steps and stands on the lotus. This suggests his spiritual passage from physical world to the state of enlightenment or *nirvana*. This is the mystical feature of the painting. The figures of Hindu gods Brahma with a basket of grain and Lord Indra with a fish welcome the new god in the scene of Buddha's birth. The presence of Hindu gods in Buddhist manuscript suggests the religious harmony between Hinduism and Buddhism.

*Visnudharma* manuscript covers of 11<sup>th</sup> century depict lord Vishnu's ten incarnations. These paintings teach moral lessons and ethical values. Whenever the evil forces and demons terrorize the human beings, lord Vishnu takes various incarnations and destroys them protecting the innocent (Sharma, “magical”, 2021). The incarnations in the form of fish, tortoise, boar, half man- half lion are anthropomorphic.

*Paubha* painting is worshipped as religious icon because it has sacred subject matter. Principle deity resides at the center of the painting surrounded by subsidiary deities. The composition presents visual order and balance. Some *paubhas* are composed in the form of *mandala* paintings. *Mandala* is a well-ordered and tightly composed geometric structure. It is applied as an instrument for meditation. It is a visual support for concentration. The visual images, symbols and shapes in the periphery take the viewers toward the central divinity. The Cosmos and the self are expected to unite in the image of central divinity of the mandala (Kramrisch, 1964). The assimilation suggests oneness beyond the duality the self and the other. *Vishnumandala*, dated 1420, presents four-armed Vishnu with Laxmi at the center the painting on the lotus flower.

*Nritesvara paubha*, dated 1659, reconciles the profane and sacred elements (Sharma, “Secular”, 2021). Lord Shiva and his Shakti are in erotic union along with the rhythmic dance. Other images and figures the painting emphasize the motif of the deity's union. Shiva's head resembles the shape of *Shivalinga*. Top of the shrine resembles the erect phallus. *Vajra* and lotus in the hands of divinities symbolize the union the god and the goddesses. *Vajra* represents male principle and lotus symbolizes female.

The paintings on the walls of the Hanumandhoka durbar narrate the scenes from *Devimahatmya*. Battle of goddess Durga and demon has been presented on the wall. Manuscript illuminations and *pauvas* are religious paintings. They represent the subject matters of the religious texts, mythologies and Hindu epics (Sharma, 2009). Some paintings present the landscapes in the background including the images of plants and mountains. Some paintings depict the portraits of the donors at the bottom of the *paubha* paintings. However, these secular figures and images are secondary to the religious figures.



After 18<sup>th</sup> century, during the regime of Shah Kings, there is a shift in the domain of Nepali art. Arts break away from mystical, magical and religious contents. The artists independently created works having the subject matters of worldly events and objects. The portraits of royal family without religious imagery. Western realistic techniques influenced portrait paintings during the Rana regime, for the rulers were fascinated by the western arts while they were visiting western countries. They got their portrait painted in realistic form (Singh, 1976). They used western media like imported canvas and oil color. Pal (1978) states about the arts of the Rana rule, "after the mid-nineteenth century Nepali portraits were rendered entirely in the European tradition" (*The Arts*, p.132). The artworks break away from religious and mystical motifs.

After the end of the Rana autocracy in 1950, Nepal was open to the external world, and more western influences appeared in Nepali art. Many artists went to foreign countries for art education. When they returned home, they brought expressionist, fauvist, cubist, and surrealist techniques. Western influences came to Nepal both from the west and India.

Globalization contributed for the cultural encounter of western forms native contents. Science and technology changed the means and speed of transportation and communication intensified globalization. Telephone, electronic mail and social media interconnected many individuals around the world. Information flow became efficient and fast. Distant cultural symbols and images invaded our home through computer network and satellite television.

Increase in cultural exchange, tourism industries and migration reinforced the crossflow. Migrant workers and diaspora have created virtual neighborhood among their brothers in native country. This influenced the socio-cultural activities. Globalization compressed time and space (Harvey, 2000). Multiple interconnections and linkages transcend the national border. Knowledge, fashions, images and communications are extensive in all areas of human activities (McGrew, 1992). Globalization generates cultural contestations and contradictions creating tension between heterogeneity and homogeneity (Lechner and Boli, 2000). Due to cultural encounters, individuals are compelled to reconstruct their identity and space.

### **Research Methodology**

The area of this research is contemporary Nepali art. This is a qualitative research based on the interpretation of visual arts. Study uses both secondary and primary sources. Paintings, sculptures and other artworks are primary sources. Theoretical background has been created using secondary sources like books and articles on art history, criticism and critical theory.

### **Discussion**

From the ambivalent space, Nepali artists of contemporary time integrate alien forms and technique, and native subject matters through interaction and dialogue. Elements of native art tradition reappear in new form. Cultural interplay and compromise take place in the creative process. Contents of folk and traditional arts are revised, re-historicized and reorganized to explore the contemporary political and cultural issues of Nepal. Established cultural images, icons and symbols are subverted to question existing authority and power.

Various heterogeneous forms are juxtaposed creating a pastiche. There may not be clear purpose to do such adaptations. Visual images intersect the texts transgressing the conventional boundary. The works reconcile referential images with abstract forms. Realistic forms of early Nepali arts coexist with expressionist, surrealist, cubist and abstract forms.



Contemporary Nepali sculptures and paintings depict intercultural and intra-cultural appropriation. Three dimensional images appear on the canvas. Third dimension is the special feature of sculpture. Collage of pictures and photographs on the canvas have blurred the boundaries between painting and photography. From the dynamic ambivalent space, the works negotiate heterogeneous images and forms giving voice to multiple cultures. This reconciliation of multiple cultural images has broadened the creative possibilities of the artists in the context of Nepali art.

Women's roles in Nepali society and culture are resisted and opposed to relocate the social and cultural position of women in the country. Some artworks revolt against socio-political tyranny, exploitation and domination demanding for justice and freedom. Hybridity challenges the homogenizing forces from the "third space" to "elude the politics of polarity" (Bhabha, 1995, p.209).

Visuals and texts are juxtaposed in the artworks. Photographs are cut and pasted on the canvas providing three dimensional qualities of sculpture to the two dimensional paintings. Sometimes artists paint pictures accompanied by music and poetry recitation. In the heterogeneous creations multiple elements are intertwined. The creative artists mediate alien and native aspects from in-between space. The negotiation of heterogeneous forms and images presents multiple socio-cultural issues. The co-presence of diverse images and symbols in the composition speaks of both the alien and the native (Sharma, 2009). These hybrid works are open-ended, and their significances are multiple. The identities of these art works are multiple and narrate a tale of artistic becoming in the present context.

The intertextual works appropriate western forms and techniques along with native contents and myths. Then, they reintegrate native cultural images. The works have revised, and reformulated the recurrent symbols and images of the early Nepali paintings and sculptures applying expressionist, cubist and surrealist techniques. There also appear the subject matters of *pauvas*, manuscript illuminations and narrative scroll paintings. Some contemporary works present the figures of architecture. Typical Nepali cottages along with human figures in typical Nepali costumes are native socio-cultural images. The artists have contextualized the western forms to convey their personal expression using the images and symbols of locality.

The cubist and surrealist forms are exploited to present fragmentation, loneliness and disillusionment. The artists negotiated western forms and local contents. The borrowed images and techniques de-contextualized and re-contextualized for different purpose. The amalgamation represents the cultural self along with the cultural other.

Referential images are juxtaposed with abstractions. Verbal texts and visual images appear on the same space. Alien influences have contributed in the making of new artworks in contemporary context. Globalization facilitated for such cultural transformation. Globalization brought social and cultural encounter between alien and native art forms. Advanced means of communication and transportation contributed for the cross-flow of art products and artists in the contact zone. Artists got exposure to new forms and techniques resulting in the intertextual transformations. New artworks reread and reinterpret the early works. The process revitalizes the aesthetic experience.

Cultural identities of the artworks are provisional and ever shifting. The provisional identities are constructed and reconstructed in the in-between space of multiple influences.

The meanings are constantly changing in relation to existing power structure and historical context.

Cultural difference gives way to dialogue and interaction between global and local cultural symbols and images on the process of redefining their space. Nepali artists make "local sense of the collision" (Lechner and Boli, 2000, p.320). From the ambivalent space, the artists revise and re-interpret both local and global images. The fluctuating movement provides a sense of new life (Pieterse, 1995). Nepali artists decontextualize alien forms and techniques. They subvert and menace the authority through irony, "mimicry and parody" (Griffiths, 1995, p.240). External forms are sometimes cited, criticized and mocked. Nepali artists recycle, reorganize and reformulate both native and alien symbols, images and forms through dialogue, and negotiation.

Such artworks merge and intertwine global and local images and symbols creating a mélange. They also re-read and re-integrate the forthcoming new cultural icons and images. Hybrid forms unsettles the concept of nationalism and racism. The new practices focus on social co-operation and interdependence. The mélange expects the endogenous and exogenous understanding of arts and cultures (Pieterse, 1995). New art forms elude the politics of polarity and authority. (Bhabha, 1995).

Cultures and arts are not monolithic and pure but interconnected and heterogeneous. Cultures are constructed in ambivalent space. Cultural identities and meanings are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space (Bhabha, 1995). Hierarchy, originality and purity of cultures are questioned. Primordial unity is questioned and appropriated. Thus, there is no is pure and original culture.

The history of arts and cultures is the record of cultural borrowings and sharing (Said, 1994). Culture is never a matter of ownership but of common experiences and interdependencies many different cultures (Said, 1994). Artworks are intertextual since they are connected with other compositions. Early forms are revised and reintegrated. Barthes (1992) states that a work of art is a "multi-dimensional space" where different texts are married (p.1132). It consists of "a fabric of quotations, resulting from a thousand sources of culture" (Barthes, 1992, p.1132). Early works influence the artworks of contemporary time. Bloom (1988) remarks that a creation is response to the other work. New artist rewrites works of early artist (247). Umberto Eco (1988) points out: "works are created by works" (p.447). Contemporary artworks go beyond genres and disciplines.

Contemporary Nepali artists have blurred and redrawn the boundaries among various art genres like sculpture, music, painting, literature, theatre and photography. Texts are put together with visual picture. There is affinity in poems and paintings. Heterogeneous co-presence of vision and textuality redraws the boundary of the genres (Melville et al., 1995).

Paintings and sculptures create musical effect with their rhythmic colors and lines. Rabindranath Tagore states: "My pictures are my versification in lines". Rhythm in thought and sound is common to all arts art forms. Rhythm "transforms inert materials into living creations" (qtd. in Archer, 1989, 51). For Martin et al. (1991), rhythm of abstract painting represents the "frozen music" (p.81). Gombrich (1992) argues that some colors are loud, sounds are bright. The voice can be velvety, and light is cold. Colors create the musical and tactile sensations in the audience. The images, figures and colors can be meditative, descriptive, dramatic and narrative. Contemporary art forms are do not "fit into a preconceived early-century concept of either a painting or sculpture" (Daniels, 1978, p.46).



Multi-generic contemporary Nepali arts unfix the boundaries that hide domination, exploitation and authority (Cohen, 2000). These artworks are not governed by the pre-established rules of art and creativity. The artists attempt to formulate their own rules for their creation (Lyotard, 1986). They invent new idiom for their expression through experimentation. Seemingly cultural positions in arts "turn out to be symbolic forms of political moralizing" (Jameson, 1988, p.383). The significances of these open-ended art forms are contingent and provisional. The work "defers any final answer, implying that all answers are relative and provisional" (Wain, 1999, p.4).

Debate and interaction take place among multiple cultural images on the process of composition. Inter-cultural translation and "dialectical reorganization" bring the cultural change with provisional identity (Bhabha, 1995, p.208). Re-integrated cultural symbols and images present mimicry and irony. Globalization, cultural encounters and dialogue give way to multiple identities (Pieterse, 1995).

Identity and meaning are always positioned in context. Kwame Anthony Appiach (2001) states that they "changing responses to economic, political and cultural forces" (p.227). Identity always remains on process becoming in relation to time, space and context. Hall (1997) states that cultural identity is a matter of 'becoming'. They undergo constant transformation. Contemporary Nepali arts integrate multiple forms, techniques and contents from diverse cultures, and their significance is plural.

### **Conclusion**

Contemporary Nepali arts reread native contents and appropriate western forms and techniques through dialogue and negotiation. They reinterpret and reformulate the symbols, images and forms of early Nepali arts applying western techniques as tools. Identity of the artist is not a certain and fixed essence having fixed cultural origin. It is constructed through dialogue, debate and negotiation with existing political, economic, cultural and heterogeneous social matrix. Cultural identity and meanings of these arts is not found in transparent shape but constructed and reconstructed out of heterogeneous cultural symbols and images. The constructed meaning is not certain, fixed and universal but multiple and ever shifting.

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