



Batsa Gopal Baidya, Dus Avataar, 2019, Mixed-media on canvas, 183 cm x 122 cm.

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ARCHETYPES IN BATSA GOPAL VAIDYA'S PAINTINGS

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Abstract

Batsa Gopal Vaidya's paintings integrate primordial images, symbols, and figures from myths, cultures, and rituals. These images and symbols are the archetypes that appear recurrently in his artworks. The artist shares these primordial images from his collective unconscious, the common heritage of mankind, and the storehouse of archetypes that reappear in the creative process. They suggest the pattern of experiences of our ancestors. These recurring communicable images function as an aesthetic mode of communication in society. Swastika, shaligram, tilaka, the Himalaya, rivers, various deities, and their attributes are such images and symbols that do not only provide aesthetic pleasure but also take the viewers back to their cultural roots, rituals, and myths. This article attempts to trace the archetypes in Vaidya's works and explain their significances.

Keywords: archetypes, primordial images, collective unconscious, symbols, myths, culture

Introduction

Batsa Gopal Vaidya's paintings present primordial images and recurrent cultural symbols that suggest something else beyond themselves. Before interpreting his works in terms of archetypes and the collective unconscious, it would be worth introducing the artist himself and his artworks briefly. Contemporary Nepali artist Vaidya was born in 1946. He graduated from Sir J. J. School of Art in Bombay. His artworks have been exhibited in more than eight dozen national and international art exhibitions. He bagged the prestigious gold medal in

the Asian Art Biennale in 1981 organized in Dhaka, Bangladesh along with many awards and honors within the country (Chitrakar, 2010).

Vaidya was one of the members of SKIB-71, an art group founded in 1971 by four young artists returning from Sir J. J. School of Arts, Bombay. The acronym SKIB stands for the names of four founding members of the group-Shashi Shah, Krishna Manandhar, Indra Pradhan, and Batsa Gopal Vaidya. Although they have their own idiom for their expression, one thing they share is the reinvention of traditional images with

new significance (Sharma, 2014). Andre Alexander (1992) points out the features of the works of SKIB-71 that each artist represents many breakthroughs for contemporary Nepalese art, showing the way to even younger artists, urging them by their example to take visual risks. However different they are, artistically, they seem to have one thing in common that they cling to traditional beliefs and influences which they view as an important basis of their work (Alexander, 1992). Among them, Batsa Gopal Vaidya is a symbolist who presented images that signify beyond themselves.

Vaidya's abstract art forms are associated with symbols and images of Nepali culture. His works show the influences of Tantric philosophy and Hindu mythologies (Singh, 1976). Abhi Subedi (1992, p.10) also points out that there are "tantric abstractionism and the use of Hindu sacramental pigmentation" in his paintings. Sangeeta Thapa (2003) remarks that culture and heritage dominate his paintings. The preservation of heritage in a rapidly changing urban setting is one of his main concerns. Each painting is a dream landscape shimmering out of the artist's own windows (Thapa, 2003). God is everywhere in his works suggesting mystery.

The images of gods and mountains in his paintings are not realistic representations but suggestions created by lines, colors, and texture. At a glance, his paintings are "abstract pieces in vibrant colors, but a closer look reveals a hint of the god" (Alexander, 1992, p.28). Constructed around symbolic images, his works create a spiritual atmosphere which is the central characteristic of ancient Nepalese arts (Thapa, 2003). In the exhibition catalog, Abhi Subedi (1993) writes about Vaidya's paintings: "Batsa

Gopal discovered his interest in the Hindu religious motifs principally in the Ganesha. To him, Ganesh is an icon, a motif, and now a mandala – a symbol of the expansion of consciousness."

S.B. Palsikar (1997) remarks that he has evolved an exclusively stylistic Nepali genre. The bright, uninhibited and often elementary colors he is fond of using have now found proper functional homes in the hard-edged tantric oriented renderings. The strict formalism of a tantra drawing goes very well with the uniqueness of Vaidya. Banshi Shrestha (1997) writes that the background of his works seems to be deep and abstract but the forms and figures make the meaning of the paintings clear.

Madan Chitrakar (2010) states that Vaidya's works display his perpetual fascination for the culturally rich past of medieval Kathmandu. Some of his works include Kaalratri, Navaratri, and Ganga. Other famous works are The Creation and Garuda which are presently in the prestigious collections of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum in Japan (Chitrakar, 2010). The artist is greatly inspired by the rich ritual art of Kathmandu. This is best illustrated by the beautiful work Kaalratri. He also presents exotic forms from Asta Mangal (the eight auspicious signs) and Nava Graha (nine cosmic forms). In addition to the central images of the deity which appears in all these diverse works, he has used rows of triangular forms – to suggest a panorama of mountains as background for the deity (Chitrakar, 2010). Batsa Gopal Vaidya and his artworks have already been introduced briefly. Now, the concept of the archetype will be clarified before interpreting the paintings.

Archetypes

Vaidya presents archetypal images

and symbols in his artworks taking viewers to cultural roots. Archetypes are the primordial images that are stored in the collective unconscious of an individual. The symbols in works of art and culture are the common heritage of mankind. According to Carl Gustav Jung (1992), the collective unconscious is the storehouse of archetypes that appear recurrently in the course of history whenever the creative fantasy is expressed freely. Archetypes give form to the experiences of our ancestors. When we examine primordial images in artworks closely, they suggest typical experiences of our ancestors. Northrop Frye (1992) states that archetypes are the recurring communicable images that function as a mode of communication in society. Furthermore, Joseph Campbell (1971) defines archetypes as the basic images that inspire ritual, mythology, and vision throughout the annals of human culture. The works of art consist of archetypes that are stored in the collective unconscious and aim to communicate social norms to individuals. The archetypal figures, symbols, and images are in existence from antiquity which are constantly handled down from one generation to another through myths, arts, cultures, and rituals. The archetypes remain in the memory of the community. Myths embody the ancestral experience of human beings. An individual is a container of his/her ancestral history, who is shaped by the cumulative experiences of the past. An archetype is a communicable symbol that connects one art to another art along with society. In other words, archetypes are parts of human civilization. In the creative process, artists may use archetypes unconsciously that signify a broader cultural context. The forthcoming part of this article attempts to trace archetypes



Batsa Gopal Baidya, Kālarātri, 1981, Oil color on canvas, 122 cm x 76 cm.

in Vaidya's works along with their significances.

Interpretation and discussion of paintings

Vaidya's artworks depict archetypal patterns suggesting the roots of Nepali culture, spirituality, and mystical ambiance. To support this statement, three paintings - 'Kālarātri', 'Buddhism', and 'Creation' have been selected for discussion. The images of the river, the Himalaya, archetypal symbols like lotus, fish, swastika, tilaka, conch shell, wheel, ax, mandala, spiritual concepts, and figures of divinities are recurrent in his works. These images, symbols, and figures are the keys to the broader



Batsa Gopal Baidya, Creation, 1980, Oil color on canvas, 91 cm x 91 cm.

spiritual, ritual, cultural and mythical world that originated in antiquity and have a link up to the present due to the collective unconscious of the community and individuals. As a part of the community, the artist consciously or unconsciously presents those primordial visual images and symbols in the canvas that suggest beyond themselves and lead the viewers toward the invisible and intangible world at the moment but it is as real as our life and culture.

In the artwork, Kālarātri, the destructive nature of the god has been presented with archetypal symbols like a sword, bow, arrow, mace, ax, trident, and wheel. The creative aspects are related to lotus, conch shell, and rosary. Both the destructive and creative aspects go hand in hand through the destructive nature is overt in the painting. The creation is destroyed and new creation begins from the ashes. The symbols refer to the myths of divinities. Bow and arrow are particularly related to Lord Ram, the

hero of epic, the Ramayana. Conch shell, wheel, mace, and lotus are the attributes of Lord Visnu, the principal character of Visnupurana. Trident is the weapon of Lord Shiva. Lotus is the symbol of enlightenment. Rosary is generally used while chanting the mantras. The condensed art form with multiple primordial images recycles the contents of myths. As an occult painter, Vaidya takes his symbols and forms from myth but presents them in a different way (Shrestha 1997). A magical ambiance is created with recurring motifs like sharp triangular tantric mountain symbolizing the hidden mystery and spirituality (Thapa, 2003). Chitrakar (2010, pp.46-47) aptly points out: "it was a reminder that, regardless of how we seek to dissociate from the past and want to look forward, the traits from legacy stay on. He began to explore imageries in the unfathomable sea of great Hindu epics Ramayana and Mahabharata and mythological stories." Batsa Gopal Vaidya (2001) himself states that he was brought up around the temples, the festivals and various other cultural activities observed by the Newar people and his fascination with these cultural traditions and artistic heritage are evident in his paintings. Wishing to preserve the heritage, he takes up age-old images (Alexander, 1992). The presence of the Himalaya and river creates a meditative ambiance. The Himalayan peaks are unusually sharp. The artist exaggerates the shapes of the peaks. The work alters the normal pattern of the Himalayan mountains with the cascades of mathematical exactness (Sharma, 2014). The decorative pattern gives the impression of antiquity and sacredness.

Vaidya's artwork 'Buddhism' recycles the structure of mandala using archetypal symbols like fish, conch shell, swastika,

lotus, river, and the verbal sign of 'om'. The intertextuality and copresence of multiple cultural semiotics bring forth the mythical connotations from the collective unconscious. The verbal sign within the circle at the center has been surrounded by other primordial symbols mentioned above giving the structure of mandala. In early Nepali mandala, the central image, the figure of divinity is surrounded by subsidiary deities, and other images in the periphery are positioned within certain geometric shapes. The figure for central divinity is bigger than the images around them. The composition is structured in such a way that the images in the periphery lead the viewers' eyes toward the center where the individual is supposed to concentrate (Sharma, 2014). The mandala is taken as the yantra (instrument) for meditation and concentration.

According to Subedi (1993), the mandala value of the painting is perceived in the circular movement of the invisible lines of the forms, the shapes, and the composition itself. The painting attracts the viewer's attention and dramatizes his or her spiritual and mystic experience. Each image is near and closer to the everyday experience of spiritual awareness. His successful balancing of the lines, figures, color tinctures and the suggestion of the motions within the painting create a psychological impact on the viewer who begins to view each painting in terms of the aesthetic sense, the source of which is the combination of the primordial feelings as an aesthetic construct (Subedi, 1993). The canvas gives the viewer the experience of an intimate perception of the archetypal images.

Chitrakar (2010) states that he embarked on choosing various motifs but always within the same realm of historicity and

culture and emerged with exotic but simple geometric forms like a swastika – the eastern symbol of good luck. The conch shell symbolizes the spiritual message for enlightenment. Fish is the first incarnation of Lord Visnu. Lotus is the symbol of enlightenment. The verbal sign 'om' is the mantra which is considered to encompass the entire universe. All these archetypal symbols reinforce the theme of meditation and spirituality.

The images and form demand the viewer's imagination and active participation for appreciation. The combination of contrary images in free association in the canvas may be provisionally reorganized by the active viewers drawing imaginary links among the depicted primordial images. Thus, this art form is plural and has multiple significances.

Vaidya's 'Creation' recycles the contents of early Nepali arts, culture, and the images of nature using the archetypes from Hindu mythologies related to Lord Visnu. The images are altered and arbitrary having unconventional colors and shapes. The artist with such unusual and modified modes of the painting tries to make the composition playful and plural. There is a round dark solid object at the center of the canvas representing shaligram, a form of Visnu. The image of the round dark object and the combination of tilak (the painted sign on the forehead of Visnu and the followers of Vaisnavism) is unusual. The images have been amplified exceptionally.

The artist arranges the images with the free association as in a dream. The shaligram and tilaka are bigger in proportion to the river, green mountains, and the Himalaya. The images of the Himalaya, green mountain and the river



Batsa Gopal Baidya, Buddhism, 1980, Oil color on canvas, 76 cm x 152 cm.

are condensed whereas the images of the tilaka and shaligram are amplified. The river seems to be floating above the mountain in a horizontal line rather than flowing vertically between the mountains. The combination is unconventional.

The images of shaligram and tilaka at the center are dominant because of their size and position, and this dominance reveals the structure of mandala. As in early Nepali mandala, the central images are dominant in Vaidya's Creation as well. The images in the periphery like the mountains, the Himalaya, and the river are smaller. The central position and the bigger size of the tilaka and shaligram attract the viewers' attention as in mandala. Even though the structure of the composition resembles mandala, the work goes beyond it. Instead of representing the central image in the figure, lord Visnu for that matter, the artist uses the metonymic images like shaligram and the tilaka. In the same way, mountains, the Himalaya, and the river appear in the periphery instead of subsidiary deities, geometric shapes, and decorative patterns in four sides. The artist reformulates the structure of mandala using age-old archetypes from the myths (Sharma, 2014).

As the composition is linked to the structure of mandala, the theme of meditation comes along with it. As the tilaka and shaligram are positioned at the center boldly and assertively, they become the object of concentration, and the images around them create the atmosphere of meditation. The shaligram is situated on a serene green mountain just below the Himalaya at the side of a clean river. Such images and structure remind one about the mythological setting for meditation. The concentration of the viewer upon the shaligram may remind one of the mythological ideas associated with Lord Visnu. Mythologically, Lord Visnu is the source of all creations. It encompasses the whole universe along with the aspects of creation, preservation, and destruction. When the viewer realizes this concept

through meditation, he/she is supposed to resolve the duality between the self and the other or inner self and the external world. One remains in constant bliss, once he/she experiences the union of the self and the cosmic being. In this sense, Vaidhya's Creation can also be taken as the yantra for meditation like early Nepali mandala. Constructed around symbolic images, the artworks are creating spiritual (Thapa, 2003). The work is intricate nexus of mythical images, age-old icon, symbol, and structure of mandala that emerged as archetypes from the collective unconscious.

Conclusion

Batsa Gopal Vaidya's compositions convey the theme of spirituality and meditation using the archetypal patterns of the mandala and primordial images of divinities, lotus, swastika, fish, conch shell, trident, bow, arrow, wheel, mace, ax, the Himalaya and river. Such images, ideas, icons, and symbols come from the collective unconscious and create a mystical ambiance. These paintings not only provide aesthetic pleasure but also take the viewers to their cultural roots with renewed perception. Vaidya listens to his own voice and has faith in his own experience. As a result, his works leave a unique signature in the domain of Nepali art.

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