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Art Criticism in Pakistan: A Dilemma

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Abstract:

This article highlights some of the fundamental misconceptions of art criticism in Pakistan. At one hand it draws the importance of art criticism in general, and on other hand it traces the shortcomings of art criticism in particular. It explores the ways art criticism should be understood. Usually, the word criticism conveys negative connotations. It is suggested that an art critic must understand the true spirit of art criticism and nature of art. A critic should have thorough knowledge of the formal and contextual properties of the artifacts. Art criticism in Pakistan is neither methodical nor systematic. There is a need that artists and art critics both should participate in the process of evaluation by adopting intrinsic and extrinsic methods of analysis. The article investigates some of the important philosophical concepts dealing with evaluation and judgment of art. It also examines the artist's role as an evaluator of his own work and its impact on the subsequent generation.

Keywords:

Art criticism, fundamental misconceptions, systematic, extrinsic methods of analysis,

Art criticism in Pakistan has never been understood adequately because there is little understanding of art and particularly its philosophy. There is not even a single institution in Pakistan which teaches the philosophy of art and art criticism. The literature which has been written on art is of a preliminary level and does not reflect a true understanding of art, particularly its philosophy. Almost in every institution of fine arts in Pakistan, the focus is more on producing skilled professionals, which can easily be compared to a layman. Although these professionals do have some understanding of art history in general, they do not focus on art criticism at all.

Generally, it is believed that art criticism is not the discipline which a professional artist should espouse. As a result, the focus in fine arts' disciplines is more on making and not on expounding or illuminating the precise understanding of its creation. Consequently, skill is being understood as a creation. It is true that an artist does not need to understand the philosophies of art; if one believes that the artistic talent is an inborn quality but a critic must have an appropriate knowledge to understand art and its philosophy.

This article explores the shortcomings of art criticism in Pakistan as well as some of the important philosophical concepts, which a critic must recognize before making a judgment about an artwork. For this purpose the article will highlight some of the fundamental problems art



SRAI JOURNAL OF LINGUISTICS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

criticism in Pakistan is facing. Before, exploring these shortcomings and explicating the philosophies of art, it seems appropriate to look at the nature of art criticism.

Art criticism is a branch of philosophy which is known as aesthetics. Originally, the term aesthetics was used to study experiences of sensuous knowledge for the judgment of beauty. With the passage of time the term started gaining popularity not only for the study and understanding of beauty, but also art and its nature. This implies that aesthetics not only looks at the aspects achieved through sensuous experiences, such as beauty, truth and goodness but also the sensory qualities of an object, specifically formal qualities of an artwork. It is this fundamental role of aesthetics which can not be separated from the art criticism. In other words criticism of an artwork is actually an interpretation of sensory qualities of an object and artwork. Now the question is, if two terms, such as, aesthetics and art criticism can be used interchangeably, then where can one draw a line between them? As a matter of fact, it is not possible to draw a line between the two; however, it is probable to add more to the aesthetic experience through art criticism. Art criticism then adds something more to the aesthetic judgment, and that is actually to interpret beyond its sensuous and sensory qualities. In his essay “Criticism as Retrieval” Richard Wollheim declares that art criticism “is the name of purely evaluative activity.”⁽¹⁾ This evaluative activity is adequate only if an art critic combines theoretical and practical knowledge to pass on his/her critical evaluation and judgment of a work of art. Therefore, theoretical understanding, consistent, systematic and impersonal attitudes are the key extensions of art criticism in aesthetic judgment. A critic must have philosophical breadth, and should be able to construct analogies and hypotheses. It must introduce standards and contemporary interests, which are objectively demonstrable. Art criticism is not simply saying negative things about an artwork. As according to Dennis J Sporre:

[It is actually] a detailed process of analysis to gain understanding and appreciation. Identifying the formal elements of an artwork—learning what to look for... is the first step. We describe an artwork by examining its many facets and then try to understand how they work together to create meaning or experience. We then try to state what that meaning or experience is. Only when the process is complete should the critic offer judgment.⁽²⁾

Sporre warns the critics not to adopt any pre-established ideas, or even opinions, about an art work. He suggests, a critic should “bring a set of standards developed essentially from personal experience.”⁽³⁾ According to Sporre, “our knowledge of an art form can be shallow, our perceptual skills may be faulty, the range of our experiences may be limited. The application of standards may be especially difficult if we try to judge an artwork as good or bad based on pre-established criteria....”⁽⁴⁾ It means, if one believes that only a realistic painting is good then



SRAI JOURNAL OF LINGUISTICS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

he/she may not be able to appreciate an abstract painting. Pre-established standards as well as pre-existing opinions can deny and harshly reject an artwork which is excellent in many ways, embraces the new standards and contemporary thinking, but does not fit in any pre-established formula or straight jacket.

Art criticism in Pakistan never gained popularity because there is very little understanding of its significance. Art criticism is tremendously important not only for the understanding of art in general but also due to its importance as a springboard and a facilitator to preserve the history and culture. Art criticism can explicate terms, standards and interests of a particular period which can pave the way to reconstruct that period and age in future. Moreover, it preserves underpinning ideas of the artists and the general public. Art criticism can actually acquire an independent status, transcending above time and art. It registers everything which is significant. In many ways art criticism not only adds to the artists, own ideas but discovers many theories and hidden concepts. Obviously, esthetic experience of a particular period is difficult to regain, but art criticism can make it easier to be close to its actual time frame. If art criticism is so important then why did it not gain popularity in Pakistan?

Art criticism did not gain popularity in Pakistan because great and famous artists did not elucidate their research methodologies, techniques and ideas. In the west, artists always played a vital role in developing new techniques and ideas. It was believed that every artist should play his/her role to confer to this world something valuable. As Leonardo da Vinci said:

Seeing that I can not find any object of great utility or pleasure, because the men who have come before me have taken for their own all useful and necessary themes, I will do like one who because of his poverty, is the last to arrive at the fair, and not being otherwise able to provide for himself, takes all the things which others have seen and not taken but refused as being of little value.⁽⁵⁾

Leonardo is implying that there is always something left by others which can be taken from a new angle, so do not hesitate to put forward your share. Leonardo's statement also establishes the importance of an individual as a different person from the others; therefore, seeing the same thing can always add something new in the existing knowledge.

Leonardo da Vinci was very conscious about his responsibility as an artist. Comparing an artist's life with the process of sleep and its connotations with death; he says, "O thou that sleepest, what is sleep? Sleep is an image of death. Oh why not let your work be such that after death you become an image of immortality?"⁽⁶⁾ Here artists wanted to understand and feel the breath of his creation and move beyond the narrowness of his vision. Again and again, Leonardo stressed to dig deep inside the self in order to produce immortal art. He said, "the artist should



SRAI JOURNAL OF LINGUISTICS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

not seek distraction in company but live a life of complete harmony with the natural world and in the process to penetrate the outer forms of nature and discover something of its inner core.”⁽⁷⁾ This is how Leonardo explicated his ideas on human and divine reality and stressed the union between the two. He further maintains, “whatever exists in the universe, in essence, in appearance, in the imagination, the painter has first in his mind and then in his hand; and these are of such excellence that they present a proportioned and harmonious view of the whole that can be seen simultaneously, at one glance....”⁽⁸⁾ Here one sees an artists with deep thought, illuminating his theory of harmony and proportion. Leonardo’s theory of harmony and proportion completes as a whole, not through his sensory experiences, but also through his sensuous faculties. Leonardo presents himself not only as an artist but also as an art critic, who combines his theory of perception with conception and amalgamates his vision with his deepest thoughts.

Similarly, Michelangelo, another great western artist discussed and shared his theories with others. It is true that he never felt comfortable with writing theories because it was not his medium of expression but he expounded many ideas in his poetry and letters to his friends.⁽⁹⁾ So his poetry became the main driving force for the artist and at the same time a point of reconciliation between conscious and subconscious of the artist. According to Clement:

The *Rime*, or as Michelangelo once curiously called his poem, the *novella*, contain numerous references to art. These varied and confessional pieces, penned casually on the backs of letters, on margins of sketches, or on plans, penetrate his thought directly—if not, indeed, his subconscious, since a few were dreamed up at night.... One cannot understand, for example, what led Michelangelo to portray himself in the skin of St. Bartholomew until one has read over a score of poems in which Michelangelo renounces his mortifying pelt....⁽¹⁰⁾

Clement maintains that it would be really difficult to understand Michelangelo’s feelings and ideas without such supporting stanzas. Sherman Lee adds, “we can be fairly safe only when we add to our eyes and our science the eyes and mind of those people we are studying, however laborious the task of recreating their point of view.”⁽¹¹⁾ Giorgio Vasari⁽¹²⁾ once explained that “men of genius sometimes accomplish most when they work least, for they are thinking out inventions and forming in their minds the perfect ideas which they subsequently expressed and produce with their hands.”⁽¹³⁾ This declaration perfectly fits in Leonardo’s case, who painted *Mona Lisa* in four years. It is believed that he took several years just to paint the face of Judah in his famous painting *The Last Supper* because he was unable to find an appropriate manifestation of a person, who can betray Jesus.



SRAI JOURNAL OF LINGUISTICS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

The French artist Paul Cezanne's loyalty to see things invented many theories of art. He is considered one of the most influential and revolutionary artists in the history of western art. He theorized the way an artist should see nature. Through his art, he expressed his theories about the nature of art and problems of optical experiences. Cezanne always proclaimed that he was painting his sensations. It is this fundamental truth, which he suggested every artist should amalgamate. Cezanne suggested that every artist should paint without any preconceived memories and ideas. He always wished to see nature, "like a man who has just been born."⁽¹⁴⁾ In another remark Cezanne reinforced the same idea in these words, "[it] is the duty of painters to give the image of what we see, forgetting everything that has appeared before."⁽¹⁵⁾ Paul Smith refers to a similar point of Cezanne in which he maintains, "today our vision is little tired, imposed on by the memories of thousands images. And these museum, paintings in museums!... And exhibitions!... We don't see nature any more; we see pictures."⁽¹⁶⁾ This is the reason that many of Cezanne's paintings appear wrong in perspective, his figures out of proportion and distorted. For him line and color was one, he believed an artist paints and draws at the same time; there is no line in nature but only color harmonies which are juxtaposed. He told his friend Bernard, "To read nature is to see it under the veil of its interpretation as colored patches following one another according to a law of harmony. These colors are thus distinguished by modulation. To paint is to record sensations of colors."⁽¹⁷⁾ By combining seen and unseen, emotions and logic, Cezanne tried to understand the illusion of real appearances, as well as concentrated on the relationship and tensions existing between pure visual experiences of nature. He finally introduced his most important theory of art, saying, there is no line in nature but only the "sphere cylinders and cones."⁽¹⁸⁾ It was his vision of geometrical form which was taken up by Picasso, who ultimately became the founder of Cubism by painting his first cubist painting, *The Women of Avignon*. Henri Matisse another French artist focused on the formal aspects of his art work. He articulated his studio practice in these words: I look for "the essential character of [my] subject, of purging 'superfluous detail' in the pursuit of an overall harmony."⁽¹⁹⁾

In the early twentieth century, an art critic Roger Fry analyzed French artists' artworks and suggested that modern artist such as Paul Cezanne and Henri Matisse are not simply producing a copy of nature; they are not actually imitating nature but painting the "direct expression of imagined states of consciousness."⁽²⁰⁾ Similar ideas were explicated by another highly influential American art critic Clement Greenberg, who noted that Cezanne's paintings are not that important. He felt the most important thing which needs to be considered is the way he painted simple subjects such as still life and landscapes.⁽²¹⁾ It is noteworthy that it was an art critic such as Greenberg who actually made Cezanne an apocalyptic figure by tracing some of the modern aspects of Cezanne's and other nineteenth century artists in his article, entitled "Modernists Paintings." These few examples of great masters suggest that the artist was not only



SRAI JOURNAL OF LINGUISTICS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

an artist but in fact he was a complete institution. He was an artist, philosopher, teacher and above all, a great critic. He was source of inspiration in every manner.

At the same time, above discussion definitely reflects a sense of shared understanding and role of the artist and critic in art criticism. Criticism generated by these professional artists, such as Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci and Cezanne and critics like Greenberg was highly important because they were the best communicators of their tradition. They were also concerned with the processes of analyzing and assessing the formal qualities of the artworks.

Pakistani artists, on the other hand, rarely speak about the signification of objectively demonstrable properties of their art works. Therefore, they can not convey the scientifically proven evolution on the basis of empiricism. According to Richard Eldridge, “among the strategies considered for the understanding of art, however, the close elucidation (making use of relevant historical knowledge) of the formal arrangement of the elements of the work so as to bring out what it represents and express in a distinctive way especially pertinent to the understanding of art as art.”⁽²²⁾ In this statement, Eldridge highlights the importance of an artwork as an art piece and differentiates it from an ordinary object or even from the artifacts.

He proclaims that art as an artwork is unique in a sense that it generates critical understanding of its formal properties along with the historical understanding. It specifically draws one's attention to the art object itself and “involves dwelling on just why these elements are put here, in these relations to one another, as a way of inviting and sustaining imaginative exploration of the work.”⁽²³⁾ Dewey perceives critical understanding of art as elucidatory, because of its perceptual nature.⁽²⁴⁾ Arnold Isenberg adds to Dewey's argument that use of similar elements by different artists or even by the same artists in an artwork can not make its language and meaning identical. They can produce totally different meanings “depending on the overall particular configuration of elements, [such as] a falling wavelike contour in one painting may be graceful, in another jarring.”⁽²⁵⁾ It is therefore, importance of perceptual skills that one can interpret formal elements, such as color, line, texture, form and principles such as: unity of composition, harmony and rhythm. It is the responsibility of the critic to suggest and provide a line of direction for perceiving what is depicted and the way it is depicted, disregarding discriminations and prejudices. As according to Eldridge, if one “possesses such an inventory, than [one] would have rules for making meaningful and successful art and rules for critical deciphering of meaning and value.”⁽²⁶⁾

It is imperative that an art critic should have some knowledge of philosophy as well, so that he/she can concentrate on the moral and epistemological values of artistic experiences. Understanding of art is possible only if a person has complete knowledge of art and specifically the nature of art. A critic in Pakistan does not analyze an artwork in the light of a conscious preoccupation of the artists with reference to its historical perspective. Therefore, some of the



SRAI JOURNAL OF LINGUISTICS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

fundamental changes or important aspects of that particular period remained intact. An artist's own life can be a good source of information; therefore, art in the light of biographical information can identify many hidden aspects of the artists. It can also explore the techniques and methodologies of the artist as well as his/her understanding about the philosophical concepts. An artwork thus speaks about the artists as a distinctive individual, complete and unique in its own circle of self. A critic can identify some of the deliberate intentions of the artists. It is important to note that an artist actualizes and records in painting what he undertakes to signify human beings and their relationship with the humanity. This is because an artist forms his message utilizing formal property and tools in the light of social practices of his/her time. By using a particular formal language an artist documents not only his feeling and emotions but also knowledge to put those feelings and emotions together through certain medium and technique, which is called style.

Art criticism, then, is a kind of historical document, which scrutinizes the artist's insight and psychology through his/her practice. More importantly, it elucidates some of the retrospective accounts of artistic inventions. It has never been understood in Pakistan that an artist is an ambassador of his/her inner self, and art criticism acts as a dispatcher and assumes the status of documentary endorsement. Art criticism in Pakistan is not used to examine an artwork on international standards and theoretical concepts, which can play a key role for an in depth study of an artwork. Art criticism and art practice thus, should be taken as reciprocal projects. Art criticism in Pakistan should play a vital role in deciphering art practices in the light of philosophical, historical and cultural parameters, avoiding pre-established ideas and false opinions.

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SRAI JOURNAL OF LINGUISTICS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

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