

The figurative mode of story telling is deeply entrenched within the civilizational discourse in India, like anywhere else. Most of the artists included in this show occupy a curious place in the history of modernism in India, where the right to tell stories took on multiple connotations, viz., can the narrative mode register some shared collective cultural memory? Can history be retold via the trope of story telling? Does the compulsion to form visual analogue to this collective memory impinge upon another mode of representation?

Horn Please

Re-Visioning Indian Stories

Narrativity in art has prevailed both during the colonial and post colonial times, but in different modalities. It was via stories, say from ancient epics, that a past could be recovered and celebrated against the colonial view that such a past was out of sync with the forward march of modernity. It would be more accurate to say that a wedge was driven into the form and content of narration when the Governor of Madras, Lord Napier, in 1871, flung down a challenge to native imagination that it could do well to adopt the western technique of academic realism to tell stories from Indian epics.¹ This disjunction between form and content in art was structural to the imperialist presence, whose economic policy was based upon the reformulation of raw material from the colony to forge a new content. In the West, modernism scripted its self-definition against the figurative mode of representation, paving the road to formalist abstraction, which found its logical extreme in minimalism.

There has been a tenacious adherence to figurative thematic in Indian modernism, which survived the onslaught of the most intense drives towards abstraction. It was academic realism, as institutionalized in the colonial art schools, which was a force to be resisted. In one of the seminal art schools in Santiniketan, a hotbed of cultural nationalism, the empirical study of nature and life study was strongly discouraged as part of its pedagogic practice. This had a crucial implication for the nationalist refashioning of the narrative/figurative style, which grew out of its compulsion to ignore contemporary reality, steadfastly fixing its gaze on the past, be it on Ajanta paintings, Mughal miniatures or Far Eastern landscape paintings. Early modernists like Amrita Sher-Gil rejected the Bengal School style of painting on the grounds that it affected “sentimentalism” and cloying stylization. If we move beyond modernist criteria, it is possible to read back into the style adopted by the Bengal school a heightened linguistic consciousness. Before the arrival of the images of mechanical reproduction into modern Indian art, the mediated nature of representation and its awareness, that there are already constructed ways of seeing the world, seems to have been a part of the colonial condition. This peculiar feature of early national modernism, where it was a common practice to draw from stylistic readymades, explains the ease with which postmodernist narrativity reinvented itself in the nineteen-eighties.

We have art in order not to die of the truth. Nietzsche²

The art of story telling in post colonial India emerges out of a vexed past. Fredric Jameson was of the view that mythomania was a symptom of colonial condition where the imaginary displaces the social and the historical. In the place of history, too traumatic to be recounted, the creative impulse turns towards the fictitious world of fabricating stories.³ How does one account for mythomania in the postcolonial times then? Today, it is difficult to subscribe to a single narrative form that can capture the third world experience, narrativity, particularly that which is animated by national allegory and is not an exclusive feature of third world texts.⁴

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1. Geeta Kapur, *When was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (New Delhi, 2000), p.159.

2. As cited by Hayden White in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore and London, 1992), p. 50.

3. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London, 1991), p. 369.

4. Aijaz Ahmad, “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and the ‘National Allegory’” in *In Theory: Class, Nations and Literatures* (New Delhi, 1994), pp. 101–102.