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The Convalescent's Diary Art and its Possibilities in Psycho-oncological Health

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"ES: The cancer cell [...] is the protagonist now. It is trying to be a rebel. It has acquired a language of its own.

HG: It is trying to acquire an identity?

ES: Identity! Exactly! So in the process of acquiring identity, it tries to acquire a new language.

But then society, the surrounding environment, the other cells, now they are saying - now it's trying to rebel. So we better shut it.

HG: So you mean to say the cancerous cells are there in all human bodies?

ES: It's not in all human bodies but what I'm trying to say is [... suppose there's a tumour mass, there is a micro-environment with a low pH, acidic environment, then there is hypoxia, low oxygen, they might be a conducive ecological niche to trigger a particular cell to behave like a rebel. In the process of becoming a rebel, what happens? It no longer wants to stay as a conformist in the society. It denounces the name of a conformist; it acquires mutation so that it can now survive in the harsh environment.

HG: The philosophy of a cancer cell here would be something constructive in order to understand it better, right, when you use these terms."

BERLIN based arts practitioner Hannah Hurtzig's artistic project 'Last minute Exercise' used an artistic framework to invite the general public into a discursive gathering. All were gathered to think on the subject of death. The quoted excerpt belongs to the transcript of one of these conversations that took place between Dr. Ellora Sen, a scientist at the National Brain Research Centre and artist Hema Guha. As part of this project, several thinkers, philosophers, practitioners and specialists gathered in a space and offered their time and thoughts for a conversation with people who signed up for the sessions. The conversations offered building blocks of mental toolkits for confronting a subject such as death.

The event of imminent threat to life and its regular course, and the fear or anxiety that shrouds it is a delicate subject. When faced with such a scenario, all possibilities of empathetic speech lose ground. One is quite alone and left alone in one's relationship with dying as well as in surviving. However, the process of recovery and care concerns a wider human network attached to the person suffering. A survivor often returns to life transformed, renewed and with an altered sense of living in many details. Similarly, losing one's beloved to a potentially terminal ailment, forces the bereaved to deal with this absence and their personal lives in an altered way.

By reconfiguring our ways of seeing, art thereby gives us opportunities to experience and perceive the world through various timbres and tangents, creatively.

THE ACT OF SEEING AND THE ACT OF MAKING

Art and especially visual arts has had a close, invested pre-occupation with the internal world of man, his psyche and the various mental landscapes of emotions. This engagement can be traced as far back as the first century B.C. in the Indian subcontinent, in the caves of Ajanta in Aurangabad where characters come alive as sentient minds, some in deep mourning, some in calm joy, many reflecting a Sāttvikābhava that pre-supposes the making of the Bodhisattva; an atmosphere of calm sadness arises from the anticipation and acknowledging of truth, death and justice.
9.4 The Unquiet Mind

The prime act of making creatively is that which arises out of an intrinsic impulse of the human to respond to his/her living condition, and to try and positively form a lateral universe of possibilities and flights of imagination. Psychology and art have been since the beginning of scientific thought closely working in the discoveries, analyses and rehabilitation of creative health. When one is ill, or when one suffers, the experience of the sufferer is her own and perhaps the chief aim in restorative psychology for this suffering is a strengthening from within, a reassurance of the self and internal re-construction. Here in the act of seeing and perceiving, the act of reflecting and the act of creating itself are vital to this process of healing.

Sensation or experiences of an artistic work have been core of a lot of theoretical thinking around the world, all well aware how subjective and uniquely personal these experiences can be, yet how collective their co-ordinates are. These sensations often have enabled psycho – somatic transformations in individuals. Reading, watching a performance, seeing a painting; all these acts of experiencing art evoke a sensation, a reaction and a transformative moment in the raika or the perceiver.

Neo-Impressionist painter Paul Cezanne ( ) towards the end of his life, painted a series of landscapes of Mount St. Victorien seen from outside of his window, each work evoking a different mood as made at different points of time. His brush-strokes that seemed almost like a temporal blur, one that approximated shapes and contours, colour and light, of the world around rather than depicting with photographic fidelity, offered sensation to the viewer as a bodily experience. In the artist’s own words, “I do my thinking as well as my looking, while I’m painting” This holistic vision of the acts of seeing, making and experiencing not as divisive notions but as one coherent physicality, is perhaps what must be resuscitated as we talk about art as an important medium in psychological rehabilitation. As a viewer, when we see a work of art, it is not an experience that resides in the object seen or in the viewer, but in the act of seeing that happens in between. By way of seeing, we make our own version of that art work, thereby in a way re-creating it. It is very similar to the process of listening. When attentively listening to a particular musical rendition, the listener in his/her own way recreates the music in his mind and hereby is partner in the entire creative process of the music; the act of seeing and the act of making are two sides of the same coin. Isn’t that at the core the historical notion of the forest being replaced by the church, which was then replaced by the museum. Trans-creation thereby is intrinsic to engaging with art.

French philosopher Gilles Deleuze in relation to Francis Bacon’s paintings says ‘sensation is that which passes from one ‘order’ to another, from one ‘level’ to another, from one ‘domain’ to another, a master of deformations.” In the late seventies, the New York school of artists with figures like Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, brought existentialism back into creative action. The action paintings of Jackson Pollock, the Colour ensembles by Mark Rothko and the Zip paintings by Barnett Newman, as well as Russian modernists like Kandinsky and Malevich, were talking about a larger condition of the mind, human crises and personal thought through a distilled style of painting be it through physical action or using vast expanses of plain colours and shades juxtaposed in patterns or plain canvases of flat stillness ripped at points with ‘zips’ or strips or merely presenting a ‘Black Square’. The emergent avant-garde modernism re-enforced the creative process as art having agency in society versus its role as something merely aesthetically pleasurable.

This re-looking and avant-gardism in engaging with the world, which is true to any process of human growth, is something that is brought back into reckoning when the body is in distress. By understanding the process and the circumstances through the help of narratives and story-making, a distance and an alternate perspective of the situation can give relief from intense emotional surges, much like an earthing that one needs during an electric glitch. This was essentially the role of Aristotelian tragedy, where catharsis—a purging, or cleansing of the emotions is said to help the audience re-construct themselves to a psychic well being.
4. p.78, Richard Schiff, 'Cezanne's blur, approximating Cezanne' in Framing France; Essays on the Representations of the Landscape in France 1870-1914 (Manchester University Press, 1998)


7. For instance, artist groups like Gutai and Mono-ha in Japan. For more see From Postwar to Postmodern, Art in Japan, 1945-1989: Primary Documents ed. by Doryun Chong, Michio Hayashi, Fumihiko Sumitomo, Kenji Kajiya, MoMa Primary Documents, Paperback, 2012


9. Two more photo series, Zishan Akbar Latif's '95 Mani Villa' and Sarkar Protick's 'What remains' trace very poignantly the reality of disease, aging, life, presence and the absence in death.

10. The Wellcome collection has recently digitised 800,000 pages of mental health archives, see: http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/News/Media-office/Press-releases/2014/WTP057722.html [accessed 21.01.2014]


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