

ON ART AND MORALITY

By Sadia Riaz Sehole

Almost all the popular discourse on art and the functions of art necessarily contain one issue. Rather, it would be more apt if I say that the very issue contributes to the true basis of any debate over art. The determination of the real placement and role of art in the lives of men is virtually characterized by an exhaustive and inconclusive discussion over this issue. The writers of great merit have always been and certainly will always be faced with the same issue in the course of their writings. And the issue is none other than the controversy between esthetics and morality pertaining to the functions of art.

Defining art, one comes across a number of definitions. William Wordsworth expands the scope of art over the realms of both emotion as well as psychology by calling it ‘the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.’ John Keats also seems to be following him while exclaiming his desire for ‘a life of sensuousness rather than thought.’ Then we have Joyce who perhaps gives an only one-sided view of art when he encloses his definition and cult of art into the myth of Deadylus with an underlying motif of giving a free vein to imagination and thus let it soar above the obtrusions of both life and morality. Imagination is where he centers the axis of art.

Whenever I deliberate over the many other relevant statements about the nature and functions of art, I always come to infer at least one thing for sure. This one thing is what is materialized into the expression ‘aesthetics.’ Yes, art has definitely and spontaneously something to do with our aesthetics. Here I, for the convenience of my readers and as precaution against the rise of any controversy would like to state what I actually mean by the term ‘aesthetics’. At a very surface level, aesthetics is only something pertaining to one’s love, appreciation or worship of beauty; beauty, in its various forms and orders. But to me, aesthetics is actually something much more than this. It seizes within its regime, not merely the adoration of beauty but a sense of accomplishment and a subsequent sense of satisfaction on the fulfillment of the great duties

levied on us by our senses. Here Aristotle's theory of 'catharsis' would indeed substantiate my point. Thus art, for matter exhaust our feelings (whatever nature they are of), by giving them a certain degree of a proper place after a process of concentrated sifting and purification. This finally blesses us with a sense of satisfaction.

But as stated earlier, it is only one element the authenticity of which can't be denied even by those who fervently contribute to the issue of the on-going war between aesthetics and morality. And indeed, it would be an act of injustice on my part if I don't enlist and talk of the other constituent elements of art too. As a matter of fact, my learning has made me look and examine the nature and role of art as a swinging pendulum between the two extremes of aesthetics and morality. Thus, I can safely declare that the other most important components of art is morality.

Now which comes first? Great minds like Wilde or Barnard Shaw have been fussy about it! So, we have slogans like 'Art for Art's sake's and 'Art for Life' descending down to us. Art, for Wilde, is true and faithful to its name if it only serves its own purpose; its liabilities towards sense and skill. Indeed, skill too makes and inevitable part of art as absence would perhaps render feeling and expression of feeling to an unchiseled, crude wave of senses. Wilde, we thus conclude, stands under the same banner where many others like Keats, Joyce, Woolf and Lawrence are also standing.

And if one turns one's face towards morality, definitely the tracks gets changed. The discussion shifts from sense to intellect. I beg pardon of my readers if the employment of the word 'intellect' on my part takes their minds to some discourse on Philosophy rather than art. But again, I dare say that yes, intellect is there as far as the nature of art is concerned, holding a strong affinity and communion with morality which is almost indispensable. Thus, I clearly acknowledge the relation between morality and art which goes cheek by jowl. Therefore, Henry James, for that matter, should be given more credit who declares that life and morality are both embedded homogenously in art. And again I would give three cheers to Mr. Shaw who justly allocates due share to morality in the legacy of art when he stamps his this very belief by

propounding his theory of 'Art for Life.' And then again, we also have Mr. Arnold expanding the domain of art by declaring it as the 'Criticism of life,' satisfying both the aesthetes as well as moralists.

Now here, when we are deliberating over the ongoing tug-of-war between aesthetics and morality in art, I hold a view which is entirely personal, meaning hereby that the reader is at all liberty to agree or disagree with it. As a matter of fact, to me, an artist must never too much fiddle with the question of morality in terms of art. He should better not get fussy about the intervention of morality, considering it necessary for his piece of art. Here, I wish to clear my point in an even more elaborate way lest the readers think that perhaps I am bent on kicking intellect and its sibling didactics out of the domain of art. Certainly not! Just tell a story to somebody sitting before you and he would surely exclaim, "What was that? I couldn't get anything out of it!" at its end if it doesn't carry any piece of thought or some lesson for the listener. Aesop's Fables would perhaps have not been so famous among our mothers if they were devoid of the store of thought and lesson within them. If this be the case, my reader must certainly be thinking of 'which way to go then?'

The resolution of the very issue, in fact lies in the secrets of magnanimity and generosity of art. Yes, art is generous indeed, it is both accommodating and assimilating! It originates from beauty or the idea of beautification, rises up in the aromas of emotions, passes through the corridors of sense in its journey of accomplishment and finally rests the caverns of satisfaction. Satisfaction, both the sense as well as intellect. And if 'Beauty is Truth and Truth is Beauty' then art itself performs the sacred function of picking up its moral. Or there can also be another way that morality itself on the advent of art, gets boarded into its chariot. But whatever the phenomenon, I am of the belief that harmony and the communication between both aesthetics and morality are purely spontaneous and natural in any creation of an artist. They need to be governed by and fixed or imposed set of rules. Beauty, on its own, embraces the truth while truth too, out of its will hugs beauty. Their union is just like some tributary in some river, where small lakes, seek their own way out with an ultimate end of joining each other and subsequently

submerging into the river. Here, one also needs to determine the actual status of truth, suited best to the process of creation. Should it be a truth worthy of being placed with divine or one that can be appreciated on earth? I side with the later as in the case, the piece of art would remain stuck to its original status, otherwise there is a chance of its being turned into some ecclesiastic document. The appeasing conciliation between art and morality is spontaneous as I said. Here, I would like to refer to one of the poems by John Ashbury, where he raises the same point by negating the forced fusion between aesthetics and morality in the creation of painter. The poor painter is compelled by the people in his neighborhood to choose some subject immediately and necessary for his new painting. But surely if the painter does something without any artistic inspiration or spontaneity either, the product then will not be a true work of art. Same is the case with the question of morality the imposition and stuffing of which should be abstained in the composition of work of art. So, 'Let the Winged Fancy roam' and see what miracles of aesthetics in combination with truth or morality occur, irrespective of any formal adherence to any hard and fast rules.

About the Author:

Born in January 1989, **Sadia Riaz Sehole** is the third child of her Parents. After acquiring her early education in science, she purposefully pursued her academic career in Literature. She is currently residing at Lahore, Pakistan, and working over PhD dissertation. She is a teacher, radio jockey, researcher and a utopian who is too much absorbed in the world of ideas. She has already written for various newspapers and research journals. She has two books at her credit entitled, *Red Seeps* and *The Essence of Eternal Happiness* as a sole and contributing author respectively. For her, writing is a vent of feelings, agony, dilemmas, chaos, evens and odds in life. Poetry runs in her veins and the words she breathes. She wants to be a *maseeha* for the shattered souls and reform the humanity by inculcating positivity in them.