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Paper Coordinator: Dr. Bhandaram Vani, S.N. Vanita Mahavidyalaya, Hyderabad

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Content Writer: Ms. Alisha Ibkar, Assistant Professor, AMU

Content Reviewer: Dr. Bhandaram Vani, S.N. Vanita Mahavidyalaya, Hyderabad

Language Editor: Dr. Mrinmoy Pramanick, University of Calcutta

Ananda Coomaraswamy and His Contributions to Indian Poetics

Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (August 1877 – 9 September 1947) is the pioneering metaphysician, historian and philosopher of Indian art who is credited of being the groundbreaking theorist who introduced Indian aesthetics into the West's philosophical domain.

Coomaraswamy's interest in art, culture, its history and symbolism has never been merely restricted to its aesthetic considerations. He believed art and culture to be manifestations of not only the individual minds that created it but also of the larger social and historical contexts that they are a part of. Coomaraswamy has never been a proponent of art for art's sake. He found a larger perspective in traditional art which he feared was losing its vital essences in the modern times.

His contribution to arts, history and aesthetics can put into three separate rubrics. Firstly, rehabilitating the theories of Asian art and philosophy for the west. Secondly, his extensive work on metaphysics and symbolism while serving as the curator of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Indian Section. Thirdly, developing a large body of work on the traditional theories

on art that was eventually developed further into the Traditionalist School or the philosophy of Perennialism.

Coomaraswamy's intervention came at a crucial point in history when the attitude of the Edwardian West towards Asian culture was exceedingly contemptuous. The body of art that had been produced by the East had been negated and relegated to the sidelines as something 'second-rate' and 'inferior'. For him the Eurocentric assumptions and negligence became a challenge and he took to familiarizing the West with the sacred and traditional iconographies of Asia. His later academic scholarship involved work on traditional metaphysics. He himself has referred to his work on perennial philosophy as primarily Oriental, secondarily Medieval and lastly Classical.

His seminal works on traditional art include *Figures of Speech or Figures of Thought: The Traditional View of Art*, *Introduction To Indian Art*, *The Transformation of Nature in Art*, *The arts & crafts of India & Ceylon*, and *Christian, Oriental Philosophy of Art*, *Guardians of the Sundoor: Late Iconographic Essays*, *(History of Indian and Indonesian Art*, *Teaching of Drawing in Ceylon*, *The Indian craftsman*, *Viśvakarmā ; examples of Indian architecture, sculpture, painting, handicraft*, *Vidyāpati: Bangīya padābali; songs of the love of Rādhā and Krishna*, *The mirror of gesture: being the Abhinaya darpaṇa of Nandikeśvara and Indian music*, *The Transformation of Nature in Art*, *The arts & crafts of India & Ceylon and Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*.

His vast body of work on the metaphysics includes *Hinduism And Buddhism*, *Myths of the Hindus & Buddhists (with Sister Nivedita)*, *Buddha and the gospel of Buddhism*, *A New Approach to the Vedas: An Essay in Translation and Exegesis*, *The Living Thoughts of Gotama the Buddha*, *Time and eternity*, *Perception of the Vedas and Metaphysics*. Coomaraswamy in the latter half of his life has worked on social critiques and commentaries some of which were published posthumously. Some of his notable works in the genre were, *Am I My Brothers Keeper*, *The Dance of Shiva - Fourteen Indian essays*, *The village community and modern progress*, *Essays in national idealism*, *Bugbear of Literacy*, *What is Civilisation and Other Essays*, *Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power in the Indian Theory of Government*.

Major Influences

In his work, Coomaraswamy has heavily referred to philosophers like Augustine, Plotinus, Plato, Aquinas, Rhineland and Ekhart. He is said to have borrowed from the Shankara, Lao Tzu and Nagarjuna. Being a proponent of Art for Purpose, he held great regard for Morris and Ruskin and followed their works closely. He negated the idea of treating art, culture and beauty as luxury or medium of mere entertainment. Often stating 'Industry without art is brutality' he has asserted that art cannot be cultivated separately from its purpose. This philosophy of art which later for him became the philosophy of life helped him draw parallels between the philosophical thought of the medieval Europe and the Traditional Indian thought. Following the same philosophy, and further drawing from Ekhart's writings, which he called the Upanishads of the West, he developed the Perennial philosophy with the thesis, 'Art is Religion, Religion Art.'

Understanding Coomaraswamy's Aestheticism

To Coomaraswamy art can be held to be free of religion or outside the peripheries of philosophy. To understand his conception of traditional Indian Aesthetics one needs to recognise the four assumptions of the Perennial Philosophy. Only in relation to it one can ascertain Coomaraswamy's insights to the conception of Art, Aesthetics, Purpose and Universal Power.

- a) There is the presence of an Ultimate Reality. This can also be termed as the Cosmic energy, the Unitary force or *Brahman*.
- b) The divine Unitary power encompasses and is manifested in man. The Ultimate Reality becomes immanent and renders man ultimately real. There is also an eternal yearning in man to seek the source of *Brahman*. This strife of man towards the Cosmic Energy is both innate and connatural.
- c) This immanent Unitary force helps man recognise the relation and similarities between the manifestation of the Universal power that lies within him and that which lies outside him. For man to analyse this reality man needed to be in a rational mental mode. It is only through the 'intellect', Coomaraswamy believed, that man can recognize this Principle of Identity.
- d) The proponents of Perennial Philosophy, one of them being Coomaraswamy, presuppose that Universal Power reveals itself from time to time.

Coomaraswamy's Conception of Art

Coomaraswamy's theory of art deviated from the accepted notions of modern aesthetics like that of Croce. The term Aesthetics is derived from the greek word 'aisthesis' meaning sensation or perception of sensation. Coomaraswamy believed the word to be misnomer if the definition of the word reduces its meaning to mean merely a reaction to certain stimulus. Art to Coomaraswamy is associated with the intellect. He discredits the notions of modern aesthetics as merely the 'aesthetic surface' and not the deeper truth. He writes, ' Beauty has to do with cognition' and 'it is not by sensibilities but by his intellect that man can be called an artist'. Art to Coomaraswamy is a manifestation of rational thought.

Speaking of art as an intellectual vocation requires-

1. Understanding the reason for composition.
2. Understanding the motif of the work.
3. Understanding the meaning of the work as something not derived from outside but integral to the work of art.
4. Understanding that the work of art should not merely appeal to feelings but also to the intellect.
5. Questioning what good does the piece serve. (Coomaraswamy was a strong proponent of the idea of art for a purpose).
6. Questioning that the piece of art has been born out of a deep set understanding and wisdom of the artist and not some 'inspiration'.
7. Coomaraswamy believed the language of art to be symbolic, not vague but like mathematics well understood and precise.

Coomaraswamy believed that art could only be dealt in symbols. Art is the means to seek the ultimate Cosmic Reality which is the same Unitary Power across cultures. Symbols become a universal medium that can connect to different ages, cultures and spaces. He believes it is the *summum bonum* of art to connect the knower to what is to be known. It the purpose of art, he writes, "the final end of beatitude equated with the vision of God whose essence is the cause of beauty in all things." The artist and the art assimilated together become media to seek *Brahman*.

Coomaraswamy negated the idea that art can either be beautiful or useful at a particular time. He contradicted a number of tenets of modern art criticism through the principles of Traditional Aesthetics. In traditional art it is believed that 'it is by art that things can be properly made; there can be no good use without art.' The beauty of art and its purpose are complementary to each other and would hold less or little value without the other. Speaking of the idea of Art for Art's sake which he strongly opposed, Coomaraswamy draws an analogy to the saying, 'Virtue is its own reward'. Just like the Virtue cannot be the end in itself, Art too can only be a means to seek something greater. Art to Coomaraswamy's Traditional Aesthetics can be a medium to find the Ultimate Reality. This way art gains spiritual purpose and meaning. Coomaraswamy agrees to Aristotle when he asserts, 'The general end of art is the good of man.' Similar are the reservations of Dante about Art when he states, 'purpose of his Paradise is "to remove those who are living in this life from a state of wretchedness to the state of blessedness'. Art then becomes requisite to seeking spiritual development.

In Coomaraswamy's traditional theory of art, there is no space for a distinction between Useful Art and Fine Art or craft. To Coomaraswamy all art is always artistic and the same time beautiful. A strong advocate of Art for Purpose, Coomaraswamy negates the idea of Art that is 'Useless'. Art that merely please and not serve any purpose is not art in the true sense of the word.

Coomaraswamy's Conception of the Artist

Traditional Aesthetics believed that every man is an artist, except for the man who is an idler. One who creates becomes an artist with distinctive sensibilities and the others- householders, workers who use things of art are consumers. Patrons are not the only consumers of art. He rejected the idea of genius as propagated by modern philosophy. He did not believe it to be a highly developed and functional mental ability or personality. He believed genius to be a spirit that had been encompassed within the immanent Cosmic Energy. Every man who seeks the source of the Unitary Reality possesses genius.

He rejected the idea of originality, self expression and individuality as terms that have little or no significance. His philosophy of traditional art believed that the essence of art has always been not the unique personality of an individual self- the artist, but the universal self of man. He develops his idea further to negate the idea of a masterpiece that is laden with superficial notions of the artist's unique or distinctive personality.

Coomaraswamy's traditional aesthetics asserts that all forms of Oriental, Christian and folk art are necessarily anonymous. Artist creates things on the basis of his observation as a man who gets his vitality from a supra-individual level. He portrays in art not what he sees as a man but what he perceives as archetypes of those figures. Coomaraswamy agrees with Ruskin when he states, 'virtue of originality is not newness' but only genuineness. There can be minimal stylistic characteristics that locate a work of art in a particular culture, time or space, but the idea of originality or innovation remain fallacious. An analogy from the tradition of Indian Music can help elucidate Coomaraswamy's take on Originality. The pre-defined ragas are always intact. Further improvisations are/can be made. Taking forward Ruskin's thought and alluding to his comment on genuineness, he writes, 'the last desire of the traditional artist or thinker is to be original; he only endeavours to be true.' Coomaraswamy says this on originality; 'The traditional craftsman who repeats the same designs is; working continuously on a higher level of reference than the man whose images are all of immediate and private invention. The traditional artist is more than one man deep.'

The idea of freedom in traditional philosophy of Coomaraswamy is different from the idea of freedom in modern art criticism. The artist is not trying to produce anything original or innovate anything 'new' and hence the question of freedom becomes out of place. The artist has the freedom to conform to the ideal, the superior reality that he is seeking. Coomaraswamy believes that the idea of freedom becomes functional only when art gives the artist freedom from his ego through anonymity. He strongly condemns the study of the work of art as the autobiographical work of the artist. He terms it pathetic fallacy to take only biographical or psychological concerns of the artist while judging a work of art.

Coomaraswamy's Conception of Beauty

Coomaraswamy exalts truth and does not consider beauty as equivalent to it. Instead he remarks that beauty is the attractive quality of truth. According to Coomaraswamy, the function of beauty is to allure people to the beautiful aspect of truth. Though beauty is not synonymous with truth, it cannot be separated from it either. Beauty, truth and goodness are all part of a single principle. The introduction of goodness in the equation raises up the issue of art and morality. Beauty cannot be the ultimate aim, as it is truth which is the most important aspect in the principle. The three elements cannot be separated either, they are present together in a work of art.

Coomaraswamy states that God is the first cause and source of all beauty, and all beauty is only the likeness of His beauty. Later on he wrote that Beauty is the name of God and one aspect of the Godhead, *Sat* (goodness), *Chit* (truth) and *Ananda* (beauty).

Coomaraswamy's Traditional Aesthetics

Coomaraswamy's aesthetics is based on traditional Indian aestheticism towards a view of oneness of Reality inherent in multiple world-objects and events. Coomaraswamy is concerned with the elevation of consciousness through art. In his analysis of Valmiki's poetic outburst in the Ramayana, Abhinavagupta brought to light the conscious-elevation in which the inner principle is revealed to the artist and aesthete through *parokhsa*. Coomaraswamy stated that this is identifiable in the consummation of thoughts and feelings through a Daivam *Mithunam* of man's inferior and elevated natures leading towards oneness of Reality, which is an important step in the process of achieving Release or *Moksha*.

Even though Coomaraswamy adopted the Hindu conception of Aesthetics, he did not disregard the functional facet of art. Coomaraswamy attempted to develop an aesthetics situated in traditional Indian aestheticism while at the same time moving it away from complete mysticism towards intelligibility which would involve mind-process as well. The important areas which Coomaraswamy's aesthetics focused on were:

1. The apprehension of realities underlying the immediate perceptions by the mind. (*pratyaksha*- vision of art).
2. Internal processes of the mind in apprehending the content of different forms of art.

The two points given above lead to the illumination of objects and evoke the innermost states called *bhavas*. At this stage of aesthetic consciousness, a distinction arises in the perception of "things known" and "things perceived". Abhinavagupta used *Prathibha* (mental mode-intuition) to define the power of visualization of the image in its fullness. *Parthibha* can also be understood as the power of mind to grasp something subtle. Coomaraswamy's functional aspect of art which brought into the equation intelligibility of the art-experience can be further understood through Bhatta Nayaka's theory of *Rasa* in which he introduced a new cognizing ability termed *Bhoga*. However the new function can also be viewed as a principle devised to separate aesthetic pleasure from all relativities and removing all dualities in aesthetic enjoyment.

The idea of beauty in Coomaraswamy's philosophy of art is related with the culture and philosophy of India. Coomaraswamy elevated the concept of beauty to the highest level, imparting to it metaphysical significance in the vein of traditionalism. According to him, *Saadkana*, *Mantram* and *Dhyanam* are disciplinary steps in the process of artistic creation and their experience. Coomaraswamy writes about a vibrant inner life which is symbolized in the images. The various expressions of calmness, repose or even suffering are symbolic portrayals of the ideals present in the artist's mind which contain the ability of generating *Rasanubhava* (aesthetic joy).

Coomaraswamy was a representative of traditional Indian aesthetics. His work is heavily influenced by its cultural and spiritual background. In *The New Approach to the Vedas* he masterfully interpreted the ancient aesthetic principles in an intelligible manner. He wrote:

1. A work of art interprets reality and expresses it in a significant form.
2. The form and content of art is not limited to the vision of the eye but related to the process of idealization of thought which leads to the communication of truth.

Theodore M. Green later reaffirmed Coomaraswamy's ideas in his essay "Art as an Expressive Vehicle", stating that art is an interpretation of the experience of man and that the world orients this experience. In his theory of beauty, Coomaraswamy referred to the work of the traditional Indian aesthetician's concept of *Rasa* which he viewed as a medium of *anandanishiyanda* (well-spring of delight) and acknowledged Pandita Visvanatha's idea of art as informed by ideal beauty.

Another major influence on Coomaraswamy was Indian aesthetician Jagannatha Pandita. Both of them explored aesthetic consciousness and found *Rasa* as the inner-reality. Jagannatha brought the *Sahridaya* (aesthete) to the level of the *Vedanta* in his observation of aesthetic pleasure as a mental vision and Coomaraswamy agreed with this conclusion.

In "The Traditional Conception of Ideal Portraiture", Coomaraswamy praised the makers of Indian and Buddhist iconography who followed the prescription of Indian *Sukranitisara* and condemned the portrayal of human likenesses. He distinguished two kinds of portraiture in Indian art and iconography – the external appearance of man on one hand and the internal image invisible to the naked eye on the other. Coomaraswamy wanted a clear distinction between the spiritual essence of a person and the empirical ego. Coomaraswamy hoped that

this distinction would help the artist and the aesthete to visualize the subject-matter of art and the spiritual principle underlying it.

There is a moral standard in Coomaraswamy's aesthetics as well. He argued that aesthetics is a human value not merely *kama* (pleasure) or *artha* (wealth) but closer to *dharma* (moral value). Herman Goetz and Jacques de Marquette praised Coomaraswamy's work for breaking new ground in aesthetics. Coomaraswamy believed that art is not simply a pursuit of pleasure, or a distraction from life, but life itself and an "attractive power of perfection".

Traditional views of aestheticism pervades the work of Coomaraswamy's aesthetics. He wrote that the "attractive power of perfection" is attainable through a state of contemplation. Traditional aesthetics viewed it as state of immersion and *visranti* (rest). Coomaraswamy used the term contemplation to mean a state in which we could raise our vision from the empirical to the ideal. This would be the state in which the aesthete is immersed and can enjoy *Koiseit pramatrubhiih* (inner realities), *Satvodrat* (pure consciousness) and *Svapraakaasa* (self-luminous) in the mode of *anandachinmaya* (ecstasy and intellect).

Conclusion

Coomaraswamy's theories of Art deviated from the earlier and the other contemporary theories of art in its understanding the purpose of art. To Coomaraswamy art serves a greater purpose of being the medium to a finding the Ultimate Reality than merely being an end in itself. This higher purpose that he associates with art also makes it didactic. Coomaraswamy has strictly believed that art cannot be secular. The aesthetics cannot be the end of the meaning of art, as St. Bonaventura believed, so does Coomaraswamy that the purpose art is to express, to instruct and at last to persuade. The genius of an artist that makes perfect and brilliant art has the potential to serve a greater purpose. But to say that art is its own meaning, or to support the idea of practicing art as its own end can only mean, in the words of Coomaraswamy, ' idolatry or fetishism.