

‘Art for Life’s Sake’: Acknowledging Gandhi with his Preceptor Ruskin

Abstract:

Literature is a mirror of society which recognized as true to life. Many writers have used literature as a medium to express the emotions, from confusion to happiness, from loneliness to self-attainment. The literature which gives pleasure and holds the place as true to life is called good literature. Edgar Allen Poe said that “l’art pour l’art”; that is, “art for art’s sake” is proved wrong concerns to Ruskin and Gandhiji. ‘Art for art sake’ gives importance to aesthetics. The phrase 'art for art's sake' condenses the view that art has its own value and should be judged apart from any themes, such as morality, religion, history, or politics. Ruskin and Gandhi both emerged Literature, Art and Milieu with contemporary era. Both of them do not present self expression as art for art sake but concerning to social reform; they present Art for life’s sake.

Key words: art, life, Gandhi, Ruskin, morality, truth, beauty,

John Ruskin was the leading art patron of Victorian era. Ruskin’s interest from art critic shifted towards social issue at the end of 1850. His interest for social issue leads him to write book *Unto This Last*. Ruskin’s political ideas and *Unto This Last* later proved highly influential. Gandhiji praised the book and paraphrased it in Gujarati. Ruskin’s book *Unto This Last* left great impact on Gandhi but one cannot study Gandhi as an art-critic for the reason that he has not written any literature as a dedicated art critic. He has studied life as a part and parcel of every aspect so it is natural that he should also express his views about place of art in life. At the age of thirteen Ruskin was drawn into the realm of Art and Beauty. The book *Roger’s Italy* illustrated by turner attributes Ruskin life’s energies. It is also noted that Gandhi did not refer Ruskin as an art-critic or an artist. He knew him only as an author of *unto this Last, A Joy for Ever, The Guilds of St. George and Fors Clavigera*. Gandhi was acquainted with the economic

and social ideas of Ruskin. Ruskin in his last essay *Ad Valorem* into *Unto This Last*, appreciated nature and says wild flowers, wild birds and creatures of forest and desert are also necessary for life. Gandhiji while translating this essay cut it very short and completely overlooked the particular part of essay. But being an Indian he was always stirred whenever there was an object of beauty- man made or natural before him. Inspired by natural surroundings, he wrote an article *Indian Art* in the *Indian Opinion* dated 17.09.1903. In the *Times of India* he read that a new palace was being built at Mysore for the Maharajah. By getting the news about he edited certain portion of the article from paper for the South African readers both Europeans and Indian.

Ruskin through his works of *Art Modern Painters*, opened the eyes of an age. Dean Farrar said that Ruskin made art an instrument of instruction. Dean has described the functions of Art: First, that art teaches to us to see; next, that it teaches us what to see; and thirdly, that it teaches us to see more than we should otherwise see.

Gandhiji wrote in his autobiography about his visit to a Great Exhibition at Paris, 1889. He appreciated the wonderful construction of Notre Dame and decoration of interior with its beautiful sculptures. There was fashion and frivolity about the street but inside the churches he found people kneeling and praying before the image of the virgin. They worshipped not stone but the divinity of which it was symbolic. This way of worship increases the glory of God. A work of art has become an instrument for the veneration of almighty. Gandhi could appreciate a work of art in this light too. On the other hand, he did not find beauty in the Eiffel Tower. Tolstoy also disparaged it by calling it toy of exhibition. Gandhi refers to art and literature that can speak to the million dumb.

In 1931, when he was returning from England, he spent a few days in Rome with Romain Rolland. There Pope refused to see him but he visited the Vatican Library. The statue of Christ in the Vatican art-collection kept him spell-bound. With this experience Gandhiji established direct relationship between art and morality. He noted great art conveys essential truth to mankind. The sculptors and the painters worked with the view to serve humanity. If a picture creates evil thoughts in the minds of the spectator, it does not worth to be called artistic. Art is that which leads man one step forward to path of morality. If it degrades man ethically, it is not art. He opines that a work of art should not be for the intellectuals or the cultured few. There is no necessity of an artist to explain his work of art to the spectator. In the book *Mind of the Mahatma Gandhi* R.K. Prabhu and U.R. Rao write:

All true Art must help the soul to realize its inner self. In my own case, I find that I can do entirely without external forms in my soul's realization. I can claim, therefore, that there is truly efficient Art in my life, though you might not see what you call work of Art about me. (Prabhu 66)

We get a comprehensive view of Gandhi's idea on art from G. Ramchandran. His discussion held on October 21, and 22, 1924. We come to know that the art which is translation of the urge and unrest in the soul of the artist into words, colours, shapes etc. has the greatest appeal for him. All true art helps the soul to understand its inner self. He gives importance to art only for as it help the soul for self-realization. The objects of nature, for Gandhi are the eternal symbols of beauty. He repeatedly talks about the glory of God revealed through the beauty of nature. He did not feel the necessity of art to decorate his walls.

Ruskin emphasizes on morality, truth and God through Beauty. Gandhi finds Truth in beauty, morality and God. Not only true ideas but truthful faces, pictures, songs are highly beautiful for him. People generally fail to see beauty in truth and ordinary man runs away from it. His of the views that whenever a man begins to see beauty in truth, then true art will arise. There can be no beauty without truth. It is inner beauty which matters to him. In his autobiography, he called Mrs. West, who came of a family of shoe-makers. She was beautiful lady of moral. He called her beautiful, because it was her moral beauty that at once attracted him. True beauty after all consists in purity of heart. **Author Zaheer Hasan complements in this regards: "Beauty is to be perceived in everything of God's doing- it is the purity of taste. And it is this purity of taste which binds man closer to God."(Hasan 43)**

In the Gandhian concept of art and beauty heart plays an important role. It is the purity of means for the attainment of noble aims. Gandhi attended many exhibition of Khadi and directed organizations many of them. There might not be beauty of exhibits and artistic perfection. He never pays attention to this outward aspect. While addressing at inauguration of Khadi Exhibition at Bangalore on July 3, 1927, he invited the spectators to go to the exhibition court and study the Khadi Movement through charts exhibited there. Critics will find charts are not drawn in artistic fashion, but he will find heart put into those charts. This is calling the real work of art in Gandhian sense. As R.K. Prabhu and U.R. Rao write:

True art takes note not merely of form but also of what lies behind. There is an art that kills and an art that gives life... True art must be evidence of happiness, contentment and purity of its authors. (Prabhu 67)

Gandhi was aware with the rural life rich in natural beauty. The graceful poise of women who carry water in earthen jars upon their heads from well to the home for long hours which create real beauty. The labour of many hours will be more fruitful and nobler than the leisure.

Ruskin believed that God alone can finish and Gandhi asserted that no man made work can compete with the beauty of nature. Ruskin in his thought of education, expected museums

in every school. Other hand Gandhi knew that Khadi exhibitions could help much in educating people. Ruskin's observation all art is praise found a realistic illustration in Gandhi when he saw the devout Christians kneeling and praying before the statue of the virgin. The moralistic theory of art in Ruskin is conveyed through voluminous works of art. In Gandhi, the same truth is told through simple and practical observation on every day aspects of life. In Ruskin views Art can be judged by the message it conveys. Gandhi also believes that artist should be always alive to his duty and real work of art appeal to all. Bhabani Bhattacharya opines that Art must preach, but only by virtue of being a vehicle of truth.

Mulk Raj Anand records his conversations with Gandhi where Gandhi pointed out the fact that arts cannot flourish in machine civilization. Gandhi said Ruskin has praised the cathedrals of Europe more and always disparaged modern art. An old art student wrote to Ruskin to resolve his perplexities on the subject of studying from the female nude. Ruskin replied that you can do without it and do much better than with it. Gandhi observed that our people have inherited great talent and our way of life is imbued with the sense of beauty. He says that craftsman make with his hands everything that we have in India. If we believe them, they can perform miracles. Gandhi knew that the modern art and science was harmful to the happy and healthy tradition. Who can deny that much that passes for science and art today destroys the soul instead of uplifting it? This observation of Gandhi reminds us of the event when Ruskin went to see a pantomime show of Ali Baba and Forty Thieves. Nobody praised the little girl who moved so innocently at that age with some natural imperfection. When the forty thieves-all girls came and lit their cigars the British public applaud them. Gandhi also encouraged the native tradition against the modern art.

Both Ruskin and Gandhi insist on a purpose in art, emphasize the importance of art as an instrument of education. And further link up beauty with truth and morality. **As Bhabani Bhattacharya says:**

I hold that a novel must have a social purpose. It must place before the reader something from the society's point of view. Art is not necessarily for art's sake. Purposeless art and literature which is much in vague does not appear to me a sound judgment. (Bhattacharya 07)

Ruskin and Gandhi both considered nature as the perfect artist. Ruskin never expects imitation of nature, he wants interpretation of nature. Man should study to take pleasure in the objects of nature. He has ever tried to teach whatever was great in human art was the expression of man's delight in God's work. We don't find art criticism in Gandhi. He does not concern to theories of art criticism. He does not write about art, painting, sculpture but Ruskin's idea of man's delight in God's work is very much with Gandhi. Gandhi regards nature as the mightiest

artist. He asserts can one conceive any painting comparable in inspiration to that of the star-studded sky, the majestic sea and the noble mountains?

Gandhi alleged that the artist should always be aware of his duty towards the people. The artist should know that art has a definite role to play in society. True work of art benefits the masses. Ruskin and Gandhi never liked vulgarity, modern art and nude painting in the sphere of art. He advocated an element of morality in art. Ruskin believes only good men can good art. The work of art should be source of spiritual enlightenment and inspiration. Gandhiji believes that art is that which leads a man one step forward to path of morality. If it degrades ethically, it is not art. A Reflection of African American Literature an article on Russia Robinson website views that: **“Art for life’s sake is a motto that should be attached to all art; art that has style, depth, poignant, and touching”.** (Art’s for web)

Ruskin studied sculptor and architecture and achieved distinction in the field of art. He particularly studied the art and architecture of the various cities of Italy. He made the treasures of Italy known to the whole world. He studied the Gothic and the Renaissance architecture and arrived at the conclusion that a good nation alone produced good architecture and work of art. Gandhi does not study art and architecture of India. He visited temples and saw the blossoming of the art there. He appreciated art of temple and carving. Similarly in the Churches of Paris Gandhi saw the perfection of the western art. To him the art of life is in following the ideals of the *Unto This last*.

Ruskin loves all the forms of beauty, nature, and of the organic form, but he had one personal trait; fear and hatred of all forms of deformity and ugliness. Once Professor of Geology Dr. Buckland, took him to a meeting of the Geological Society in London, where Ruskin found the members ugly. The same standard of good look we find in Christ Church dons sufficed to damn most of them in his eyes. This type of prejudice we do not find in Gandhi. We remind the incident of Gandhi about his Croydon cousin Margaret who in early youth met with mischance that twisted her spine. At that time Gandhi gave her brotherly rather cousinly affection. Gandhi’s devotion to Truth made him stay in Bhangi colonies. He serves the untouchables and calls them harijan. Once when Gandhi was in prison, a scorpion stung to other prisoner. Gandhi without hesitation sucked out the poison. In other incident Sanskrit scholar, Parchure Sastri was leper and asked to be admitted to Sevagram Ashram. Some members objected due to fear of infection. Gandhi not only admitted him but gave him massage and 30th January, the day of martyrdom is observed as anti-leprosy day in India. Gandhi believed that real art is in seeing the hidden beauty of moral acts.

Conclusion: At last researcher conclude that Ruskin concerned with life as a whole, and he saw life much abused in his days. He wants to set up better order to replace ugly, immoral,

deceitful conditions of life. He believes that morality is closely related to art. His Conception of art as an expression of society complements with Gandhi. The notion of 'Art for art's sake' is no more popular idea and 'Art for life sake' has taken its place. The concept of the brotherhood of art has also to a great extent been established in the modern world. Gandhi believes truth and morality as a beauty of art and artist should always be conscious of his duty towards the masses.

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