



CONTEMPLATIVE MASTER OF FORMLESS-FORMALISM AS MUSICALLY ETERNAL ABSTRACTION: V.S. GAITONDE

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Abstract

Gaitonde was intensely articulate of the perennial awareness (Dhruva Smriti) related to abstraction in its most esoteric sense possible revealing the threshold of high-end wisdom towards non-dual (advaita). The uniqueness of the stable dynamism of his abstraction has its secret in the characteristic orientation of his psychic discipline in austere mindfulness of dynamic equilibrium. And therefore, with vital impetus, Gaitonde vehemently opposed the colloquial syllogism of treating Abstraction and representation as antagonistic to each other. For him, art is a contemplation and therefore has no division. Also, in his understanding of 'abstraction,' he refuted the stagnated notions of abstraction among the critical circle of his contemporaries who have been generalizing that art devoid of representational forms is abstract art. This paper elucidates how Gaitonde reoriented hitherto Westernized abstraction in an Eastern space as a contemplative phenomenon, manifesting formless formalism as eternal abstraction with worldwide acceptance.

Keynotes: *Abstraction, Representation, Contemplation, Contemplative, Perennial Awareness, Dynamic Equilibrium, Zen Buddhism, Empiricism, Transcendentalism, Sublime, Liminal Space*

Gaitonde's esoteric traits led to an abstract flowering within him, influenced by Zen Buddhism, Advaita Vedanta, and other sages. He disassociated himself from the illusionism of corporeal portrayal of the "real" in colonial India and approached abstraction with its own autonomy of aesthetics and emancipatory potentials. Gaitonde reimagined European formalism as formlessness-formalism of everlasting abstraction, fostering the creative sublimation of the "sublime" inherent in austere asceticism. He coined the term "Non-Objective Art" to counter the lack of awareness of abstraction in modern art in postcolonial India. During the British Empire retreat, the artist class was offered devil redemption by Left-Oriented intellectuals, leading to an excessive rendition of representationalism. Gaitonde's artistic strategy drew critical attention to the ignorance of society and art critics regarding abstraction and its eternal nature as a native sensibility.

"Yet, when I say what we are fortunate to see a renewed interest in the art of Vasudeo Gaitonde, I am remarking on a qualitative Justice: the overdue but accurate acknowledgement of a painterly body of abstraction that suggests deeply metaphysical speculations of a particularly Indian nature on the causality and transience of form despite Gaitonde's professed exaltation of modernist non-objective qualities." (Denson, 2016)



Gaitonde's stern staunchness in favour of the genre of abstraction led him to be introverted but permanently divorced from the notion of modernism associated with, extrovert and flamboyant Progressive Art Group (PAG) who were permeating with the insensitivity towards transcendental quality of abstraction.

Gaitonde's take on anthropomorphism of Indian Modernists in the Progressive Artists Group

Gaitonde's departure from the Progressive Artists Group reflects his anger against the anti-abstraction sentiment in Indian postcolonial society. PAG's deindividuation led to their perception of Indian "abstraction" as primitive and archaic. Gaitonde's work stood as a rebuke to art critics for their excessive support to anthropomorphised modernism. Furthermore, his critique of the Progressive Artists Group served as a "red underline" for the group, indicating that the roots of native "perennial awareness" must be acknowledged to achieve the critical relationship between modernism and avant-garde in Indian art. The wave of abstraction in Indian art from the four posts of the country—in southern India K.C.S. Panikkar; in central India J. Sawaminathan; in eastern-western India Nasreen Mohamedi; and on the Konkan coast of western India V.S. Gaitonde—participated in the re-rooting campaign against the abrupt uprooting from the native transcendental dialectics of the Perennial Philosophy, to which British rule in India had already caused irreversible damage.

Gaitonde's 'perennial awareness' was constantly in action through his reclusive, non-attached and hermit nature, manifesting sublime and transcendental tranquillity in his oeuvre, in Meera Menezes's own words, "*Although much is made of Gaitonde's reclusive nature is brusque a forthright manner and his love of silence. He could be gregarious and fun loving with an impish streak of humor. He could be Spartan, and yet he loved the good things in life - the opera a good meal at a restaurant and a finely tailored suit. In many ways he epitomized the concept of jeevan mukta: to live once life and yet be free of it. It was this attitude of non-attachment that informed both his life and his work. Just like he freed himself early in his artistic career from the fetters of line and form he strove to detach himself from the entanglements and entrapments of a worldly life. His sublimation of the self was expressed in his restrained and refined pallet and served to imbue his works with not just a lyricism, but also a mystical dimension. His paintings flickered between being and nonbeing just as his life reflected the saying by his guru Nisargadatta Maharaj. It is a state of pure awareness beyond the limitations of space and time.*" (Menezes, 2016) Maybe regrettably, Gaitonde's natural feeling of detachment has been oversteered by nature, only to be appropriated with his physical handicap in the last years of his life due to a catastrophic auto accident he survived. His sublimation of the ego and his art plainly happened simultaneously because of his masterful adroitness in continuously individuating himself; while this occurrence may seem strange to some, to



Gaitonde it was only normal, as it would be for a contemplator. Indian art, promoting modernism globally, embodies its unique contextual modernism through abstraction and introspection. Gaitonde's abstraction addresses Western epistemology, passing the Dialectical Materialism and philosophical Plane of Immanence tests, demonstrating the importance of societal processing for individuation.

The Perennial Philosophy, a unique dimension of Indian modernism, should have been recognised as pioneering. Although not a group of abstract painters in India from the 40s to 70s, Gaitonde was resolute in understanding trans-empirical infinitude within abstract thinking, Meera Menezes quotes Gaitonde as, *“Consciousness itself is the greatest painter, the painter is in the picture. Be free of name and form and of the desire and fears they create, then what remains? The void remains. But the void is full to the brim, it is the eternal potential as consciousness is the eternal actual”*. (Menezes, 2016) Gaitonde's exploration of materialism and transcendental possibilities highlights the dynamic equilibrium of consciousness between vitalism and determinism. He reinvented abstraction, incorporating Indian Perennial Philosophical traditions. Artists' consciousness, rooted in Dhyana, Tantra, Mandala, and Zen, emphasizes the fundamental oneness in abstract and concrete concepts.

Detached Spirit and Purposiveness of Gaitonde as Confirmation of ‘Becoming’ in the ‘Being’ in the Pre-Individual as ‘Impersonal Performer of Abstraction’

An honest answer to what an uncompromising disposition pays would be “Nietzsche,” for it is the confirmed process of ‘becoming’ in the ‘being’ within the pre-individual that affirms the detachment to the unreal idea of reaching a goal in the world by the individual. Recalling Nietzsche *“if it (the world) were capable of pausing and becoming fixed, of ‘being,’ if in the whole course of its ‘becoming’ it possessed even for a moment this capability of ‘being,’ then all becoming would long since have come to end.”* (Nietzsche, 1883-1885) This is what indicates at the fact of the transience of reality that reminds of Heraclitus's famous notion *‘you can't step into the same river twice’* or Leucippus's ascetic connotation, - *‘nothing occurs at random, but everything for a reason and by necessity’ all points out to a complex system of perpetual dynamic impetus, the ever-changing parameters with static-dynamic dualism due to the complex interactive dynamic disequilibrium between ‘vitalism’ and ‘determinism’.* Therefore, *this dynamic disequilibrium is the inevitable variant and the most legitimate activator of processual ‘vitalism’.*” and “Buddha's universal wisdom which says *‘when you can't control what's happening, challenge yourself the way you respond to what's happening, that's where your power is.’* (Kandagiri, 2020) The world and human mind are unstable, but stability comes from stasis of consciousness, as demonstrated by Indian esoteric sages. Artists with this stability risk identity by amalgamating their discrete realities and, thereby, presenting us a unique view, *“in its idiosyncratic expressions, Gaitonde presents us a late 20th century fusion of global views. And what we see are glimmers – not assertions or dogmas,*



but contingencies and suggestions – of the ancient Indian metaphysics of creation that suggests that artist-in-the-world is the prototype for the idea of creator divinity; Zen-like introspections that reflect and model the structure and turnings of mind; of the existential marking of defiant human will preserving against all adversity in an absurd world indifferent to it; and of a gestural demarcation of the trails of perception and consciousness forming our picture of the continuum of nature and self. (Denson, 2016) In his essay, G. Roger Denson discusses the late 20th century as a time of European avant-garde death and post-avant-garde rebirth. This period saw fusion, amalgamation, synchronisation, and evensynthetisation of thought, ideas, and realities. This period saw remedies for Benjamin's "loss of aura" and American transcendentalism reaching its originator, i.e., India, where even Marx's "alienation" theory couldn't help itself being transformed.

The Indian Artist of the Abstract, a native contemplative disposition, revitalised Marx's Dialectical Materialism's "curse" of alienation into hermitage and detachment through the native contemplative disposition of the Indian artist. The loss of aura in the age of mechanical reproduction revitalised the avant-garde through contextual modernism. The seed of *ananda*, aesthetic bliss, and *Paramananda*, absolute bliss revitalised the native artists' awareness to transcend boundaries and attain the transcendental sublime in their art. This practice, deeply rooted in the Indian collective unconscious, was beautifully composed and sung by Sant Kabir quite aptly presented in the rendition Pt. Kumar Gandharva.

सुनताहैगुरुग्यानि, ग्यानि-ग्यानि (....)

गगन्मेंआवज्जहोरहि, झीनिझीनि-झीनिझीनि-झीनि

गगन्मंडलुमेंगौभीआनि, भोइपेदहिजमाय्

माखन्माखन्सन्तोनेखाया, छाछजगन्बपरानिहोजीबपरानिहोजी

(Meaning: The one anointed by the guru, hears (...), Soft melodious sound saying...., The celestial cow (of knowledge/ Brahman) is milked, God makes curd for benefit of everyone, Knowledgeable wise men reach for the creamy layer, Butter-milk is what world remains content with) (Gandharva, 2020)

Vasudeo Santu Gaitonde's paintings, reminiscent of Hindustani Classical vocal renditions, are characterised by their uncanny raga-like forms and mysterious centrality, as described in Krishen Khanna's essay, Sonata of Solitude. "he was not interested in creating an identifiable style. He recognized the properties of his material and his entire effort was to view and record the interactions of various elements selected in each exercise. His attitude was not unlike that of a classical Indian musician developing a Raga." (Khanna, 2016)

Gaitonde combined two discrete ideas through 'centrifugal vitalism' and 'perennial awareness', blending Eastern expertise in transcendental materialism and Western dialogical 'I' positioning for epistemological interaction within the dynamic disequilibrium



of determinism established by Dialectical Materialism.

“Most significant of all, Gaitonde presented us this cross-cultural fusion decade before it was credible to make art that openly reflected the globally and historically diverse evolution of thought and artistic production over the course of continents and millennia – and at a time when only abstract form was considered worthy of institutional consideration by the modernist cognoscenti.” (Denson, 2016) As a post-avant-garde performer of abstraction Gaitonde had reinvented the Western vintage avant-garde. In a way he transformed Mark’s *alienation-curse* into a boon for sublimation through his characteristic Eastern trans-empirical forte of nonchalant equanimity. (Kandagiri, 2020) Gaitonde, a hypersensitive pre-individual proactive for society, rejected the lucrative idea of creating art, believing it hindered learning and viewed it as a perennial process rather art should be a contemplative search. In Gaitonde’s own words *“I have stopped going to watch art exhibitions. The newer generation artists are eager to earn through art exhibitions. I am still learning about painting, because I feel it is a perennial process. Art is a struggle; you have to be always searching some thing or other and your mind should be enriched with thought.”* (Gaitonde, 2010) Gaitonde was uncompromising about the turn the newer generation was taking in those days especially when they were not going through dialecticism while remaining uncritical about the newly opened commercial prospects of art opportunities, according to this attitude art has been ramified. As he continues with his sarcasm for them with his magnanimous suggestion, *“Artists should keep in touch with music, theatre, books and writing.”* (Gaitonde, 2010) Even he abhorred and was staunch against the classification and rigid oxymoronic notions about ‘abstract’ and ‘concrete’ becoming so popular those days; according to him, *“I don’t like arresting or classifying art through their definition of ‘abstract,’ painting is just painting”* (Gaitonde, 2010) as he goes further to express his open-minded simple altruistic view on equal identity against classification of humanity either, and drawing it as analogical to the identity of painting, *“as every individual is human, be he a Hindu or a Christian, so is there no caste, no religion of painting.”* .” He nurtured the guts to personify painting and expresses his resolution, *“I shall never stop paintings, but even if I stop then shall be speaking about them. Painting and Gaitonde are synonyms.”* (Gaitonde, 2010) Gaitonde opposed the narrative ethos in painting, arguing that it should not be purely narrative, considering spectators’ mental roles. He believed that viewers should be prepared to see the artist’s emotions during execution. Vishwas Yande, a librarian, shared an anecdote about Gaitonde’s cut-throat decision-making style, emphasizing his decision-making rather than argumentation. *“listening to the Gaitonde’s comments on others’ art it seemed that actually he had achieved that seat of elevation,”* as he further writes *“I remember one anecdote in this connection, Gaitonde happened to be given the duty of introducing the visitor to the paraphernalia of S.J.J. S.A. Gaitonde paid off the duty ones or twice, but later he plainly denied it by saying that it is not his work, he is a teacher. On this issue, he*



left the teaching in S.J.J.S.A.” In another stance in the same essay Yandementions, “once Gaitonde was taking a roll of his 30-40 paintings, on my asking where is he taking them? He replied that exhibition is over so he is going to throw them.” According to Yande this showed the authentic sense of detachment in Gaitonde. Because “he lived for self-happiness, created painting for self-happiness. He avoided his signature on a huge stock of his paintings just with the thought that his signature would make them expensive fetching wealth (....) What Gaitonde was basically? We can only speculate or argue on this issue (...) his individualism was an unsolved riddle.” (Yande, 2010) Gaitonde's personal commitment to authenticity and inevitability in his creative thought led to his invincibility, akin to Paul Cezanne. He never compromised with situations or markets, earning him the nickname “The Silent Observer.” His association with Nath Panth sect poet Sant Sohrobanath AMBIYE and spiritual gurus like Ramana Maharshi led him to detach from the representational trend of Indian art, “we used to discussed about the poems of Sohrobanath and Gaitonde participated in that. Gaitonde was inclined to philosophical ideas and my interest too was towards spiritualism. Therefore, I used to ask Gaitonde to read such books. Gaitonde having been inspired by the ideas of Ramana Maharshi turned towards abstraction.” (Yande, 2010)

The Role of Contemplative Liminal Space as Transcendental Sublime in Gaitonde's Paintings

Abstraction in art synchronizes intellect and intuition, a concept present in Western and Indian contexts. In Indian contemporary art, abstraction involves self-conscious effort to transcend mind, validating the Eternal Immanent Self and perpetual awareness.

This process is akin to the concept of *ananda* and *brahmananda*, both conceived as twins. The concept of empirical transcendence is derived from Gilles Deleuze's Transcendental Empiricism, which describes the mindful action invoking transcendence to record the abstract vision revealed in the liminal space.

V.S. Gaitonde's art represents the Transcendental Sublime through empirical transcendence, contrasting Deleuze's perspective. His paintings emphasize abstract dynamics and contemplative ‘liminal space’, generating the ‘sublime.’ Gaitonde's work is significant in the post-independence era, combining paradoxical qualities and thoughts like east-west, body-spirit, physical-metaphysical, poetic-theoretical, and ancient-modern. Perhaps this unique quality of his art and his personal bearing has inspired G Roger Denson to write, “*Gaitonde's painting arises from both an Indian tradition of thought and imagery and a Euro-American Avant Garde, it also expresses a blending of a universal metaphysical and physical realities that are abundantly bestowed with compelling literary, poetic and theoretical power in its visual analogies to the harmonization and freedoms of mind, body and spirit. In this regard Gaitonde links the ancient with the modern in a way that the west at the time that Gaitonde made his art was*



not ready to receive it, let alone assimilate it - what with the art-historical reification of the 1960s still buttressing the Greenbergian claimed that Europeans and Americans had 'discovered' and 'invented' the abstract form" (Denson 2016). The uniqueness of each individual's pulse and impulse is a wonder created by nature, containing authentic and original elemental energy. This energy preserves secret codes of unique images, which the progressive world seeks to keep alive. The corruption of images can be rectified by tracing the roots of natural and primordial interrelationships between reason and emotion. Transcendental art, like Gaitonde's, focuses on the present moment and the union of reason and emotion in painting. The fear of committing mistakes is generated by the ego's insecurity complex, leading to fearlessness in creativity and distortion in the Liminal Space.

Conclusion

Gaitonde's awareness of this sensibility in his art occurs during the natural confluence of his innermost self, idea, and medium. Abstraction becomes a lived experience of the truth of impermanence through the combustion of idea fuel through the transformation of medium for the liberation of the innermost self towards the truth of permanence or nirvana. This trans-empirical theory of abstraction is practice-based and can be useful for those aspiring to contribute to the posterior knowledge of abstraction without burdening prior knowledge. As a contemplative master of formless-formalism Gaitonde musically eternal musically eternal abstraction.

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