

Aesthetic Criticism of “Longing for Love” by Syed Thajudeen

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Received November 11, 2016; Accepted December 20, 2016; Published January 26, 2017

Abstract

With more than thirty years of creative output and a significant body of works to consolidate his reputation, Syed Thajudeen Shaikh Abu Talib, ranks as one of Malaysian's eminent figurative and lyrical painters. Thajudeen fuses indigenous motifs and symbols with universal ideas and concepts, filtered through his Indian background and circumstance. Syed Thajudeen is one of visual artists, who has been successful in achieving universal appeal in his works by bringing together symbols and motifs in Malaysian with aesthetic and metaphysical elements of Indian's arts. The theory has been used in this study is Art Appreciation by Harry Samuel Broudy. According to Broudy, Art Appreciation theory has been divided to two parts: 1) Aesthetic perception which is divided in four steps: sensory properties, formal properties, technical properties and expressive properties. 2) Aesthetic criticism which is divided in three steps: historical, re-creative and judicial. In this paper, the focus is on second part of art appreciation theory and in this aim, one master piece of artist's artworks “Longing for Love” has been selected from five main collections of “Paintings of Love”. This research investigates the visual image in the painting of Syed Thajudeen Shaik Abu Talib; how it has been stirred inside the imagination? How it got stimulated by the figures and forms that are familiar to the transformations inside the artist's mind? And how it was born again on the canvas?

Keywords: Art appreciation, Aesthetic criticism, Aesthetic perception, Aesthetic judgement

1. Introduction

Syed Thajudeen has Indian background and this in combination with the Indian traditional painting techniques has had a great influence on his perfect working style and the aesthetic sense of drawing (Ibrahim, 2006). A large number of his paintings poetically and eloquently describe love between a man and a woman, and this represented love can be categorized in two main groups: works that show union between the ideal pair, and the ones which show love while separating. In these works the heroine's emotional longing to join her lover is stressed. Syed's works try to awaken a *rasa* mood, a heightened state that is related to a larger sensibility and tapestry in artistic traditions from India. In a number of samples the subject matter is woman and love and they usually share similar archetypal symbols and metaphors.

Malaysia does not possess an indigenous painting tradition, though there exist Neolithic cave drawings (in Sarawak and Perak). Prints and paintings documented indigenous flora and fauna in the days before photography. The fact is that Syed Thajudeen is a Malaysian artist (whose) artistic product is a remarkable testimony to indigenous ideas, symbols and motifs

couched in the refined aesthetic and metaphysical sensibilities of Mother India, universe and the same time Malaysia. Having a unique style, his works include a romantic treatment of the subject matter and the colours are rich as they are in the Indian medieval paintings from the Rajasthan and the Mughal tradition (the ones which are enhanced from the richness of Indian mythology). This matter in addition to the integral connection of the visual arts' with literature, dance, sculpture, music and philosophy, formed the early works of Syed.

The related theory to this paper is Art appreciation theory which has a wide variety of concept; the complication of this concept is that it somehow overlaps with the related definitions of art criticism, art history, art education, aesthetic response, museum education and aesthetic education. Harry Samuel Broudy is one of the important philosophers in the concept of Art appreciation who separated this theory into four steps: formal properties, sensory properties, expressive properties and technical properties. He also allocated aesthetic criticism to three steps: historical, judicial and re-creative. Historical: determining the nature and expressive intent of period, style and culture. Re-creative: apprehending and relating imaginatively what the artist has expressed in a specific work. Judicial: estimating the value of works of art in relation to other works using three criteria degree of formal excellence, truth and significance. (Broudy, 2008)

Since the 18th century, concepts of aesthetic experience and appreciation have overlapped. One of the traditional indispensable condition for experiencing an "aesthetic" object is to look upon it with "disinterest" attitude, as has been said by philosophers like Arthur Schopenhauer, Immanuel Kant, William Shaftesbury, and later in 20th century by Edward Boullough, Monroe Beardsely, Clive Bell, and Jerome Stolnitz. Theory of art appreciation has a wide variety of concepts; the complication of this theory lies in its overlap with the associated meaning of art criticism, art history, art education, aesthetic response, museum education and aesthetic education. Appreciation is also influenced by interpretations of notions of perception, taste, sensibility, commentary, priority and judgment or evolution. Appreciation is in relation with beauty as beauty is with aesthetic experience. In the matter of aesthetic philosophy, notions of appreciation and beauty are applied to works of art, nature, and a wide range of related artefacts. Appreciation outcomes from act of judgment, and a responsive type of judgment (negative or positive) are always depending on one interpretation. Any given interpretation is ``performed, prejudiced, interested, partial, horizontal and incapable of reaching any straightforwardly neutral or objective account of what is interpreted``. (Honderich, 1995)

Developments in art over the last hundred years such as Dadaism, found art, happenings, Pop Art, Fluxus, performance art, technological art, art of social protest, and conceptual art have seriously challenged traditional aesthetics. In his rejection of 'aesthetic experience,' Dickey (1997) asserts, "Aesthetic experience has a sharp edge that severs the referential relation to the world beyond it" (p. 147). To Dickie, Arthur Danto (1994), and Richard Eldridge (2003), traditional aesthetic response theories "tame" art "to an idle plaything of empty pleasure" (Eldridge, 2003, p. 60). Many theorists see the philosophical claim that "art is a thing of pleasure" to be a way of simultaneously "misunderstanding, devaluing, and repressing the real cognitive, political, and spiritual insights (or wit) that art may have to offer." Eldridge argues that artists "work for the sake of ideas and insight, not absorption in form" and not for "escapist pleasure" (2003, pp. 60-61).

It must be noted that in the philosophy of aesthetic, the ideas of beauty and appreciation are involved too. The term appreciation refers to understanding and apprehending the art with the sense of enjoyment. Hence the art appreciation includes aesthetic pleasure, cognitive appreciation and emotional appreciation. It must be noted that the act of appreciation may be

either negative or positive. In order to do art appreciation, one must practice and learn the criteria that are associated with the art. (Barrett, 2007)

Stein Olsen's (1988) definitional considerations of appreciation in the Encyclopedia of Aesthetics can be condensed to "the act of apprehending a work of art with enjoyment" (p. 66). Appreciation entails valuing, positive or negative; it is dependent on acquired perception that requires initiation and practice, training one's sensibilities, and learning how to apply apt vocabulary to distinguish aspects of what is being appreciated. Succinctly, appreciation requires knowledge. Olsen's definition is reminiscent of Harry Broudy's (1972) "enlightened cherishing" "a love of objects and actions that by certain norms and standards are worthy of our love. It is a love that knowledge justifies" (p. 6)

Broudy's philosophical ideas were based on traditional classical realism, which dealt with goodness, truth, and beauty. Although he was believed to be also under the influence of the modern philosophies of instrumentalism and existentialism. In his book "Building a Philosophy of Education" he describes two major concepts to his philosophical view: first is the truth and second is the universal foundations that can be traced in humanity's tussle for education and the happy life. (Broudy, 1961). For Broudy, form is an arrangement of objective senses and sensory properties created by the artists. "The artist differs from the non-artist in being able to give form to sensory materials or to see form in them where most of us do not". (Broudy, 1972)

According to the theory of Broudy, the appreciation of art is divided into four steps: 1. Sensory properties, 2. Formal properties, 3. Technical properties and 4. Expressive properties. Sensory properties: Shapes, colour, pitches, line, and volume are by themselves analyzable concepts. Colour can be understood as value of the hue, another related dimension can be intensity, transparency in different degrees. Shape can be discussed as inorganic, organic, geometric, open or closed. Line can be described in terms of width, length, and direction. Texture can be smooth, rough, dry, wet, hard-soft and coarse. (Broudy, 1988)

As perception is needed for experiencing the beauty, aesthetics will offer a foundation for justifying and explaining human judgements on whether or not something is beautiful. Other philosopher have a different idea and state more idea on what is special about "the aesthetic". According to Kant (1970), aesthetic is divided into four kinds: aesthetic judgement, aesthetic object, aesthetic experience, and aesthetic attitude. Over the course of this study, the selected painting has been analyzed according to the aesthetic judgement.

The method of this study is Narrative which is a distinctive form of qualitative research. The procedures for implementing this research consist of focusing on studying one individual, gathering data through the collection of their stories, reporting individual experiences and using life course stages, the meaning of those experiences. As Pinnegar and Daynes (2006) suggest, narrative can be both a method and the phenomenon of study. As a method, it begins with the experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals. The procedures for implementing this research consist of focusing on studying one individual, gathering data through the collection of their stories, reporting individual experiences, and chronologically ordering (or using life course stages) the meaning of those experiences (Polkinghorne, 2007).

2. Discussion

Art criticism is the process of gathering facts and information from artworks in order to make intelligent judgments about them. A person whose career is art criticism is called an art critic. Art

critics learn as much as possible from all kinds of artwork. They carefully study and examine works of art. They search for a meaning or message in the work. They gather facts that add to their understanding about the artwork. Then this information is used to help them form judgments that can be supported with solid reasons. (Mittler, 2007)

Every art critique involves the same four step process. The steps, which will be examined in detail in this and later lessons, are: describing, analyse, interpreting and judging. Syed Thajudeen's paintings of love divided to five collections based on five steps of love in Indian tradition: meeting on eyes, longing for love, joy of being together, separation and love in union. The majority of these works eloquently and poetically express love between man and woman. This love can be classified into two main categories: works depicting union of the ideal couple, and those expressing love during separation.

Here, the heroine's poignant longing to be united with her lover is emphasized and the "Longing for Love" painting has been selected as a sample to Aesthetic criticism of art appreciation theory has been applied to this artwork.



Figure 1: "Longing for Love". Artist: Syed Thajudeen Shaik Abu Talib. Title: Longing for Love. Medium: Oil on Canvas. Size: 150x150 cm. Year: 2004. Collection: The love in separation

1.1 Aesthetic Criticism

Based on theory of Broudy, the aesthetic criticism has been divided to three parts:

i. Historical

The fact that Syed Thajudeen is a Malaysian artist of Indian descent must be accepted, understood and celebrated. His travel is a case of artistic cross fertilization of the indigenous Malaysian ideas, symbols and motifs were formulated in the refined aesthetic and metaphysical sensibility of Mother India.

Syed Thajudeen’s artworks can be divided in five steps: meeting on eyes, longing for love, joy of being together, separation and love in union. The majority of these works eloquently and poetically express love between man and woman. This love can be classified into two main categories: works depicting union of the ideal couple, and those expressing love during separation. Here, the heroine’s poignant longing to be united with her lover is emphasized.

The themes of union and separation are recurrent motifs in traditional Indian visual, literary and performing arts. The *rasa* (flavour or heightened emotional state) explored in this exhibition, is *sringara* (erotic love) considered a major human emotion, and one of the eight analyzed by Indian sage Bharata, the progenitor of Indian dramatic arts.

Bharata is the accredited author of the world’s oldest compendium on dramaturgy, the *Natya Sastra* (second to fifth century A.D.), treatise on dance, drama and music. This painting (Longing for Love” in belong to second series and one most prolific, is the portrayal of the lone maiden protagonist (*Nayika*) or heroine waiting for her lover. This is also a favourite subject in traditional Indian paintings. (Randhawa, 1962)



Figure 2: Utka Nayika. A lady awaits her lover in the forest. ca 1775-1780 Kangra painting

Nayika the *Ashta-Nayika* is a collective name for eight types of *nayikas* or heroines as classified by Bharata in his Sanskrit treatise on performing arts - *Natya Shastra*. The eight *nayikas* represent eight different states (*avastha*) in relationship to her hero or *nayaka*. As archetypal states of the romantic heroine, it has been used as theme in Indian painting, literature, sculpture as well as Indian classical dance.

ii. Re-creative

The love in separation (*vipralambha*) series with specific emphasis on the heroine (*nayika*) in her lovelorn can be seen in Longing for love, waiting for the lover (dressed in *Baju Kedah*, *Baju Kurung* or *Kebaya*). Syed Thajudeen explores another aspect of *rasa* connected to devotion (*bhakti*), the highest form of love. Here the mood is suffused with stillness and introversion. The figure is enveloped in a cooling aura that elicits piety.

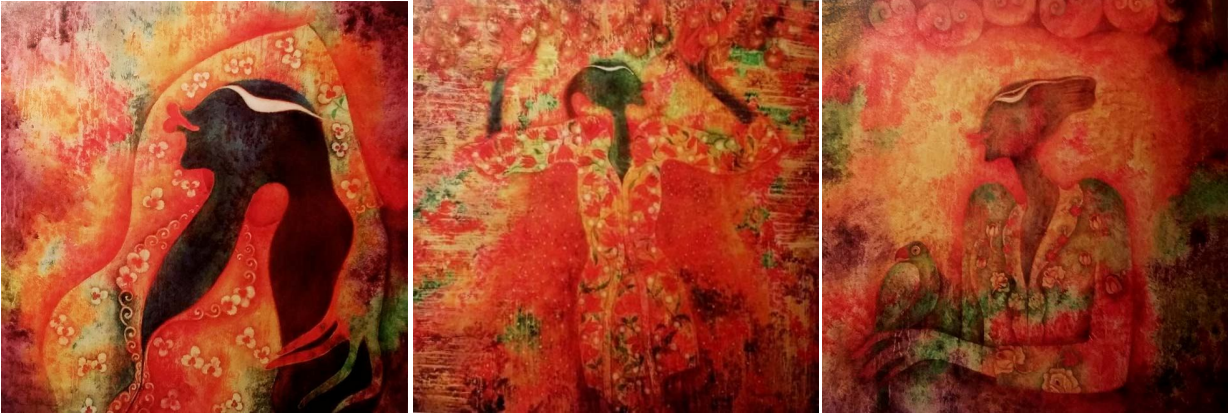


Figure 3: “Longing for Love” from the love in separation (*vipralambha*) collection, Syed Thajudeen

“Longing for love” is a painting which presents a lady waiting for her lover. Her husband is abroad. He appoints a time of return; the day has come, but he has not yet returned. Heroine keeps an appointment, but night passes without her lover coming.

In this painting, artist portrays a lady who is in separation with her lover, but she is happy by the news that her husband is on his way from a far country. She sits on the window and looks at the way while dressed in her best clothes and adorned her hair with flowers.

She is worry for her husband “is it forgetfulness or has he lost the road? Is he afraid of the elements, or has he met some acquaintance on the way, or has some fair face enticed him?” she is thinking and praying for her lover. She is desirous of union with her lover, stands on the window waiting for him with eagerness her heart’s desire. She is casting her spell of her soft smiles, dreamy eyes and perfumed lips.

iii. Judicial

Syed Thajudeen Indian background and Indian traditional painting styles have been a major influence on his unique style and aesthetic sense draw. A particular style, romantic treatment of subject matter and the rich colors as in the Indian medieval paintings of Rajasthan and of the Mughal (enriched from the wealth of Indian mythology) are apparent in his works.

His works teem by symbolic presence of nature symbols of fertility such as fish, lotus, bull, vegetables and other imagined flora and fauna. Partaking in his creation, not only does not recognize these symbols, motifs and milieu as one’s own, but one forgets the drudgery of mundane life. The remembrance of things past creates a higher awareness of beauty and poetry.

Syed established his own individualistic style and statement that transformed the early Indian influences into his present style in this work of art. In my opinion, Syed’s meaning has been transferred to audience very clear and undoubtedly he is completely predominant to his style. His faithfully to the tradition, is respectable and admirable. In addition, Syed Thajudeen is a very experienced artist who achieves this style by spending more than fifty years of his life.

In the painting “longing for love” which is a collection of various artworks with the same subject matter, artist conveys the sense of expectation and longing with combination of dark and cold colors as the sky of night, in contrast with light and warm colors of light room. The light yellow, orange and poignant red, beside the spots of pink and violet are the signs of hope and positive energy of heroin in darkness of night. The poetic and lyrical aspects of Syed Thajudeen’s paintings are clear in this artwork. As usual, elongated figures with their stylized eyes and lips,

swathed in myriad hues, are familiar for us. Syed Thajudeen fuses indigenous motifs and symbols with universal ideas and concept, filtered through his Indian background and circumstance.

3. Conclusion

The article has tried to achieve a new vision to Malaysian art and artists especially some artists who are faithful to tradition and try to spread the cultural elements of their country and respect to aesthetic and beauty in applying these traditional symbols and metaphors. Although we are living in modernization age, and almost all art style is going toward the modern elements, Syed Thajudeen spends all his artistic life to study the tradition and he never stops to discovery in this aim. Thajudeen says:

“We are moving toward the modernization and technology with a high speed. Modernization has been a big effect on our societies and all aspect of human life. But it has pros and cons effects. Although improve technology is in serve of human and had a positive effect on our life, it conquered all our life and time. We don’t have time for each other, our family, our children and it seems that something is fading in our life and it is love. By passing this changes will be clearer. Because of that, I dedicate a long period of my artistic life to this subject matter to attract people attentions to love and affection”.

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