

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Aestheticizing Ugliness

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Abstract:

Aesthetics relishes a longstanding controversy in the world of world literature. From time immemorial only one aspect of aesthetics --‘beauty’, not ‘ugliness’--has been confined to the philosophic theory of art, culture and literature. Despite the fact that both beauty and ugliness are the indispensable constituents of life, only one sphere of aesthetics, the aesthetic merits of beauty, reigned long among aesthetes, litterateurs, connoisseurs, critics and scholars. Almost the whole gamut of literary criticism, oriental and occidental, is supposedly based on the theory of beauty, classic or non-classic, whereas its counterpart—aesthetics of ugliness--reserves no room at all in the realm of literature. Even if we talk about the principle of ‘art for life’s sake’, here too the aesthetic concept of ugliness is consciously or unconsciously, deliberately or unintentionally, is missing. Aestheticians remain involved only in discussing, deliberating and delineating through literature the half-truth of life. Life--that is considered to be a fine blend of the inseparable two: beauty and ugliness. The latter has been kept aside for long even by

the modern aestheticians. And thus this major domain has been overlooked by the bourgeois thinkers and aesthetes as well. Even the concept that literature is ‘a criticism of life’ coming out of the theory of ‘art for life’s sake’ failed to give full vent to the aesthetic discourse in the literary output with absolute justification. This concept also remains constricted to the one-sided phenomenon. But no such luck, with the emergence and global recognition of marginal literature, such as Black literature and Dalit literature, and the aesthetics thereof, the aesthetics of ugliness has needed to become centripetal.

The paper in question is a humble but arduous attempt to aim at the bringing out of much less discussed aesthetic domain—the aesthetics of ugliness—in the light of Chapter 14 based on the theory of ugliness: ‘The Methodical Completion of Objective Idealism’ from the book ‘A History of Aesthetic’ (2015) by Bernard Bosanquet with a special mention of the aesthetic concept disseminated by the Hegelian Karl Rosencranz, who is principally known for his book of philosophy ‘Aesthetics of Ugliness’ (1853), originally written in

RESEARCH ARTICLE

German. Rosencranz's aesthetic philosophy turns out to be a touchstone as well as stimulus for furthering the aesthetics of the marginal literature, formulating the integrity with the longstanding mainstream aesthetics.

Keynotes: Bourgeois Aesthetics, Beauty, Ugliness, Marginal literature, centripetal

If something is ugly, look harder. Ugliness is just a failure of seeing.'

Matt Haig

Beauty is only a word for aesthetic merit while ugliness is a real phenomenon.

Goodman

'Without contraries is no progression.'

The Marriage of Heaven and Hell by William Blake

There is ugliness in all beauty...

Hartmann

Introduction

German philosopher, thinker and pedagogue Karl Rosencrantz was born on April 23, 1805 in Magdeburg, the capital city of the state of Saxony-Anhalt, Germany. He read philosophy, devoting himself mainly to the doctrines of Hegel and Schleiermacher. In 1833, he became professor at the University of Konigsberg.

In his last years he was quite blind. He died in Konigsberg on the 14th of July at the age of 74. His well-propounded theory of ugliness is not only thought-provoking but has become an eye-opener to those who paid little heed to it.

The Editor of Kant and biographer of Hegel, Rosenkranz conceives of ugliness as a distinct object-matter, outside the beautiful, and thus demanding separate treatment, but determined throughout by relativity to the beautiful, and thus belonging to aesthetic theory. (A History of Aesthetic, 401)

However, his philosophical thought came to be globally acclaimed when the English translation of his book appeared in 2015, just six years before now and pretty long after the publication of its original version in 1853. Thanks to the Bloomsbury Academic, New York, USA, that accomplished a seminal work of classical value by publishing its English translation entitled 'Ugliness of Aesthetics: A Critical Edition' (2015). The book has been translated by Andrei Pop and Machtid Widrich. The reviewer of this book remarks, "Translated into English for the first time, 'Ugliness of Aesthetics' as is considered to be an indispensable work for scholars and students of modern aesthetics and modernist art, literary studies and cultural theory, which fundamentally

RESEARCH ARTICLE

reworks conceptual understandings of what it means for a thing to be ugly.”

Let us ponder point-wise over the essence of the much-less-talked-of aesthetic theory of ugliness formulated by Karl Rosencranz:

Art: Coexistence of Beauty and Ugliness

Ugliness is just so far aesthetically justified as it is a vehicle of the concentration of the beautiful. (Hartmann, A History of Aesthetic: 432)

Aestheticism is considered to be ‘a sensibility, a philosophy of life and art...’ It is the late 18th century intellectual movement that has got its origin in the art for art’s sake theory. Aesthetics is generally associated with the study of beauty implicit in an artwork. That art is for art’s sake is a classical concept whereas the non-classical concept rests upon the art for life’s sake theory. Matthew Arnold opines that poetry is a criticism of life. This viewpoint is applicable even to other literary genres such as novel, drama, short story and so on. Art cannot be excluded from life. Such is the case with its aesthetic value that forms integrity in life situation. Life is a fine blend of the binary oppositions such as positive and negative, beautiful and ugly, concrete and abstract et al. These binaries enjoy coexistence with the merits of their own. One cannot exist without the being of the other. Without the being of untruth, there exists no truth. Art gets its neutral

status. Art in itself is neither beautiful nor ugly, neither attractive nor repulsive. Its attribution depends on the mode of perceiving it. ‘The beauty on the inside, will determine the ugly on the outside’ (205 Quotes: Anthony Liccione). Even Bernard Bosanquet endorses the analogy of the aesthetics of beauty and that of ugliness. He views that “The Aesthetic of ugliness follows a course analogous to the aesthetic of beauty. Ugliness, as the negation of beauty, must be the positive perversion of the sublime, of the pleasing or of the simply beautiful.” (A History of Aesthetics, 401-402) It is very much interesting to know that it took the ugly pretty a long time to be introduced into the world of art and literature. It became not possible until Karl Rosenkranz, who was taught by Hegel, gainsaid his teacher in terms of the hermeneutical characteristics of art. Unlike Hegel, Rosenkranz advocated the sustainable approach of ugliness in connection with aesthetic taste of a connoisseur. How keen sighted a viewer or reader is, rests on unbiased and unmixed ideas he owns.

Rosenkranz heaves a sigh of relief: ‘...the ugly is finally and in principle introduced into the world of art.in order to depict the concrete manifestation of the idea in its totality, art cannot omit the portrayal of the ugly. Its appreciation of the idea should be superficial if it tried to limit itself to simple beauty’ (AHOA 404).

RESEARCH ARTICLE

However, on the place of ugliness in art, Carriere agrees with Rosencranz. To Carriere: For the sake of completeness it must be admitted, but only either as idealized or as subordinated. It is to be noted that in these ways the ugly is said to be ‘overcome’, and in its idealization its repulsiveness is destroyed. (AHOA 411)

Beauty in Ugliness and Vice-versa

There is ugliness in all beauty... Hartmann

Something is good just because some other thing is lesser good. In the name of lesser beauty ugliness cannot be discarded from its having the aesthetic merit of its own. In this regard Goodman's standpoint is remarkable: “His point that beauty and ugliness are one subject matter is sound; but one cannot on this basis dismiss ugliness by calling it lesser beauty.” (AHOA 404)

Good refers to a positive negation of evil. Both beauty and ugliness are the natural phenomena. Both of the terms should relish the same status. Swiss novelist Gottfried Keller, commenting on Karl Rosencrantz's philosophical endeavour ‘Aesthetics of Ugliness’, states: ‘The title of the book is awkward as well as romantic. Beautiful is beautiful; and ugly is ugly... His point that beauty and ugliness are one subject matter is sound; but one cannot on this basis dismiss ugliness by calling it ‘lesser beauty.’ It is because ‘If

beauty excludes ugliness, it is useless as a mark of merit, since some ugly pictures are good.’ Hence, art must admit coexistence of beauty and ugliness. Theft is a bad act; stealing can be called ugly. But man indulged in such ugly deed might be honest. His honesty makes him beautiful. Nothing is out and out ugly or beautiful.

The Greek origin of the term ‘aesthetics’ is ‘aestheta’, that means the sense of perception. When the merit of an object depends upon how one perceives it, then why only the sublime is to be brought by the bourgeois aesthetes within the frontiers of aestheticism. ‘Therefore, aesthetic qualities, beauty and ugliness, are not parts of experience, but they are what a perceiver thinks about the experience’ (Milka Suojanen). Some of flowers, looking beautiful, contain no scent at all. Flowers provide shelters to germs and insects owing to which it is not permissible to bring them very close to the nose so as to avoid their negative impact on health. Kalidas, Ashtavakra and Socrates are said to have been ugly looking but they are known even today for their beautiful heart and mind. Aesthetic judgement is the exercise of power. To Gandhi, ‘There is ...no beauty apart from truth. Truth may manifest itself in forms, which may not be outwardly beautiful at all. Socrates, we are told, the most truthful man of his time, and his features are said to have been the ugliest in Greece.’ (JOGS 377) Prem Anand

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Mishra remarks, ‘However, internal or inward is so important in Gandhi’s notion of beauty that Gandhi warns that even outward may seem ugly, yet, it may be beautiful.’ (Himanshu Bouri 59). To John Keats, ‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty.’ Truth of beauty lies in the base element of the latter that is the thing ugly, the breeding ground of beauty. And the whole philosophical thought rests upon this binary truth. One without the other has no existence.

‘That art arises from the yearning after pure unmixed beauty is more than doubtful.’ (AHOA 103)

‘It is not the sharpest contradiction when we see art reproducing the ugly as well as the beautiful.’ (Rosenkranz ibid)

Ugliness: Background of Beauty

‘Peacock looks wonderfully beautiful, except its legs.’

Goodman avers, ‘Beauty is only a word for aesthetic merit, while ugliness is a real phenomenon.’ (Kindle) Let us analyse it citing a few examples. Lotus is beautiful, of course. But it appears in muddy water, not in fresh water. Muddy water is not fresh; it is dirty. Dirty or muddy water refers to ugliness that is the base of beauty in the form of a lotus. Furthermore, there is no being of lotus without mired water that symbolises ugliness. Mushroom looks beautiful for its nutritious property, fascinates many; but grows on stinking dung or waste. Aristophanes felt that poetic

art in its noblest sense had departed to the world below (Adorno 449). Chinua Achebe also reiterates, ‘Stench is my aesthetic’. (Kumar 31) In other words, ugliness in a general term is the background of beauty. And If we are surrounded by ugliness of our own making, we have a larger and keener sense of beauty. (AHOA 469) Bindeshwar Pathak, the Brahmin founder of Sulabh International says, ‘The toilet is emphatically not a dirty place. Toilets are beautiful places and they make us socially progressive citizens.’(TOI 14) Thus beauty is the foreground construct of ugliness whereas ugliness refers to the background of beauty.

Ugliness: Positive Negation of Beauty

‘Logically speaking the beautiful is a positive opposite of the ugly, just as the ugly is of the beautiful...’ (AHOA 408)

Why ugliness should be separated from its better half is Rosenkranz’s witty but justified concern. Both the terms form an essential integrity for actual aesthetic analysis. Beauty does not mean the total absence of ugliness. If the latter marks its total absence at the cost of no appearance at all, the aesthetic assessment of the beautiful will be next to possible. Similar is the case with ugliness, so for its artistic judgement. So, one is indispensable to evaluate the aesthetic merits of the other. Goodman is surely right that a theory of beauty ignoring the phenomenon of ugliness will not be convincing. (Kindle) The ugly is therefore

RESEARCH ARTICLE

positively opposed to the beautiful, and we can only regard them as absolutely exclusive of each other. (Bosanquet 397) Thus it can be established that beauty is the positive negation of ugliness and vice versa. Our principal concern then is with the mode in which positive negation is here conceived; with the very remarkable ground on which ugliness is after all admitted within the frontiers of fine art... (Bosanquet 401)

‘Negation of the negation, Lenin wrote, is a ‘development...on a higher basis.’ The law of negation of the negation is a universal one. Thus, negation is supposed to be a necessary aspect of development. Since negation retains the positive, development is progressive. So, development is neither a straightforward, nor a circular movement with full repetition of the old, but is a dialectical unity of progressive movement and relative recurrence, winding upwards in a kind of spiral. Such development takes place in all fields of reality: nature, the society and thinking. (Krapivin 186)

Life is tragicomic; it must admit the essentiality of the two--beauty and ugliness. The ugly repels whereas the beautiful delights. Both repulsion and delightfulness are the abstract ideas. Repulsion is a compelling force directed to delightfulness. And if we are surrounded by ugliness..., we have a larger and keener sense of beauty.

‘To the ancient Egyptians, the ugly was a consequence of a progression of time known as ageing... and through ageing even the healthy and the beautiful become ill and ugly.’ (A K Singh 29-30) And it is the ugliest realities of life—the old man, the sick, and the corpse—Siddharth encountered, that compel him to abandon his palace in quest for something beautiful. After a long penance he comes to the conclusion that living life with detached feeling is blissful. Sorrow, caused by attachment might be termed as ‘ugly’, but trying to come out of the sorrowful state of life will certainly lead to the beautiful. Thus, ugliness provides the base to the beautiful. Gandhi’s viewpoint pertaining to aesthetic perception in art is that ugliness need transform itself into beauty by way of intellect, resistance or defiance. Slavery is not a beautiful concept in any respect. Resistance for freedom is undoubtedly a beautiful thought. ‘Weisse and Schaseler have estimated the necessity of ugliness as an element without which the concrete modifications of the beautiful cannot arise.’ (Bosanquet 400) Hegel also reiterates, ‘Concreteness is a bridge to artistic realization.’ (Bosanquet 410)

‘Freedom is heaven, slavery is hell’, says Vivekanand. So mobility from slavery that is termed ‘ugly’, to freedom that is called ‘sublime’, owns aesthetic sense. To Shri Shri Anandmurti, ‘The struggle against all odds which is natural in the darkness of

RESEARCH ARTICLE

a new moon night is not so natural on a full moon night.' (TOI 18) Nowhere else is the dark shadow of idealism more obvious than in aesthetics. (Adorno 86)

Beauty: An Extension and Extended Form of Ugliness

Beauty is supposed to be an extended form of ugliness. If all we had were roses, would the thorns then be beautiful? (205 Quotes: Kamand Kojouri) Certainly not. It is because roses are roses; and thorns are thorns. But both are beautiful in their own terms. Both have aesthetic value of their own. Only the aesthetic distance maintained by a reader or a viewer makes differentiation and distinction between the two. But both are the perennial means of aesthetic pleasure. Taste or perception varies from individual to individual. It is not a thing to be forcibly thrust upon somebody else. Roses are the extension of thorns that are introduced as the background of and safeguard of the former. 'The admission of the ugly into art will ultimately resolve itself into an extension of the frontier of beauty.' (Bosanquet 411) and this idea is interesting because it shows the consciousness that art needs in some way to bring a deeper insight to bear upon reality than untrained perception can supply. (A History of Aesthetic, 45)

To be concluded, the theory of ugliness probably first popularised and

insightfully expanded by Karl Rosenkranz has of course widened the critical vista of the modern art and literature. It has not only broken the hegemonic attitude of the conventional concept of aestheticism that chiefly and strictly advocates the theory of 'art for art's sake' as well as the half-truth of that of 'art for life's sake' but also incorporated in it the essentially integral dimension to understand it well in its wholesomely wholeness. 'If art is not to represent the idea in a merely one-sided way, it cannot dispense with the ugly. The pure ideals exhibits to us no doubt the most important , that is , the positive element of the beautiful; but if mind and nature are to be admitted to presentation in their full dramatic depth, then the ugly of nature, and the evil and diabolic must not be omitted.' (History of Aesthetic, 404)

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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