

Educational Thought and Moral Philosophy of Artist S. M. Sultan

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Abstract: S M Sultan, an artist, is well known for considering rural Bangladesh as the focal point of his paintings. Almost all of his foremost work depicts the land and the farmers. However, beside paintings his moral philosophy is also highly influential and that is found in his educational thought. This study aims to explore the moral philosophy of SM Sultan. His moral thought works with three main themes: molding children's character, forming a harmonious society and making a peaceful country. Sultan emphasized his educational principles without considering metaphysical and epistemological theories. Finally, this article claims that teaching art at childhood can be taken as a weapon to build up ethically driven individual.

Key words: art, human character, empathy, harmonious society

1. Introduction

To ensure a meaningful existence in the world nothing but education is playing significant role. The current civilization differs from the past simply because of the change in educational thought. Each and every breakthrough in society is first a break with tradition or old ways of thinking. SM Sultan, a painter who was devoted to bring such breakthrough by his educational thought. As a painter S M Sultan was well accepted for his own style of paintings what reflected real Bengali life style and as a social reformer he was also renowned for his moral philosophy. His moral viewpoint exists in educational thought as we see he spent his entire life to develop ethically driven individuals to build up a harmonious community and thus a peaceful world to live in. Recent terrorist activities in Bangladesh and human rights violation all over the world echoes humanity and make us think about education system. What sort of education can fulfill the need of time? This question urged me to study educational thought of SM Sultan.

2. Background of the Study

S M Sultan believed that if an individual were good at painting or any other area of art s/he would not get involved in unethical acts. He said that by born nobody could understand the beauty of life, once somebody could realize the beauty of life then s/he would fight for that. Art helps us to realize the beauty of life (Masud, 2014). Therefore, according to his philosophy, people should be provided with education so that they can realize the beauty of life through self cultivation and to do that he mostly emphasized on art. Art is the hope which leads people to pursue freedom by raising voice against all sorts of oppression, discrimination and injustice.

Sultan is different for his own style of painting; the portrayal of extraordinarily robust men and women set in

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the background of rural Bangladesh. The central theme of his paintings is human and their fight with soil to produce crops. The virility of his figures draws the attention of the spectators at first sight. They do not resemble the farmers that we usually see around us as in Bangladesh farmers are fighting with poverty and leading lowest standard of living. Actually what Sultan brings out in these figures is necessarily the inner vitality of farmers. He thought that the peasants of our country were weak because of oppression. Therefore, he fought to bring their virility back.

2.1 Sultan's Life

SM Sultan was born on 10th August 1923 in Narail district, a very rural area of Bangladesh. The struggle of his life was started at child hood, after the death of his mother. His father was a mason and farmer. He was influenced by his father's work to draw pictures. He got admitted to a school but traditional education could not satisfy his soul. Sultan was found always busy with painting by coal, turmeric, seed of creeper etc. Through his art he got introduced with local Zaminder (Land lord) family and with their help he got chance to move to Calcutta to study art. Later on Sultan met Shahed Sohrwardy, a well known art critique and a member of governing body of Calcutta Art College and through his special consideration Sultan got admitted to the college. After studying for three years in 1944 Sultan left the college to learn from nature and the different life style of people. Remarkably his position was first in the college. He visited almost all provinces of India. In 1950 he left India and moved to America and Europe. During this time he arranged several individual and combine art exhibitions. He was the only one Asian artist whose paintings were selected for exhibition with the paintings of famous artists of the world like Pablo Picasso, Paul Klee, Salvador Dali, Matisse, Braque and so on.

In 1953 Sultan came back to Bangladesh with a hope to serve the country. Europe and America received him with the value what he deserved but in his own country he was not well accepted. He did not get chance to teach in Art College as he had no institutional certificate. Sultan came back to his village and spent time to reform the society by developing his educational thought. For almost 23 years he did not spend time for painting rather he worked to get an ideal society by establishing some fine art schools and after that again he started his fight with brush, color and canvas in full swing till his death in 1994.

Some scholars have studied the paintings of SM Sultan but as an educator Sultan is not well discovered. Some writers wrote about his moral thought but there is still much to learn.

The aim of this great painter and philosopher was to enlighten human civilization through love. To examine Sultan's educational thought systematically, three major research questions are addressed:

- 1) What are the educational principles of SM Sultan?
- 2) What is his moral philosophy?
- 3) How art can help people to cultivate morality in themselves and thus make a harmonious society?

3. Research Methodology

To explore moral philosophy of SM Sultan the research questions of the study are assessed through a descriptive analysis, this research mostly depends on empirical observation. However, I relied on individual and group interview with some of the Sultan's friends and students. Limitations of scholarly books and research work were the big challenge of this attempt.

4. Analysis

To analyze sultan's educational thought and moral philosophy emphasis is given on the following issues:

4.1 Aim of Education

In Sultan's view, the aim of education is to form good human beings through flourishing life with virtues of love. The goodness for human beings is humanity, staying outside of the society one can't nurture humanity. Knowledge of humanity without love is valueless. The great educator Confucius says "A harmonious society and an ideal state can be established through cultivation of one self, with the peaceful controlling of one's family members. As humanity is a core value of individual aim it is also a central concept not only to build a moral society but also to govern its people" (Liu Jeeloo, 2016). Like Confucius, Sultan emphasized on self cultivation but unlike Confucius, Sultan says that, art essentially helps somebody to be cultivated. Confucius talked about self cultivation through rules of propriety whereas Sultan talked about self cultivation through art by expanding love.

4.2 Portrayal of Sultans Paintings

The rural Bangladesh was the focal point in the work of Sultan. He is best known for the portrayal of extraordinarily robust men and women set in the background of rural Bangladesh. They appear as the opposite of what we see in reality. Actually farmers are very poor and they do not have enough to fulfill basic needs. They only work to produce crops and do not expect much. They are deprived of their rights as powerful people are oppressing them for long. When we stand before his canvasses we realize that what Sultan brings out in these figures are essentially their inner vitality. Sultan did not draw abstract paintings because he thought such work makes people hopeless or trivialize viewers and said, what makes people hopeless that could be a good creation but not art.

Famous Bengali writer Ahmed Sofa said if sultan were born in Arab, then he would draw the pictures of laborers of that place. If in Norway or Sweden, then he would draw the fisherman as the hero of that civilization. As he was born in Bangladesh, therefore he painted farmers as the hero of Bengali civilization (Sofa, 1981). He realized that in Bengal farmers are devoted to produce crops. They do not know politics; they do not have any demand for high standard of living. They only know how to produce and they are doing that and this is how they are developing civilization. Therefore, they are the real hero of civilization.

4.3 Principles of Education and Moral Philosophy

SM Sultan advocated building individual personalities through teaching arts to get an ideal society. By using the term "art" he focused on mainly drawing and sketching, recitation, dance and stage drama. Particular emphasis was given on painting. Sultan says the ideal society should be a harmonious society and to build social harmony individuals have to be developed with love and in this regard art can play the most effective role to shape someone's character. The kid, who draws his village, beautiful flowers, animals and pets, green leaves, trees etc. can not commit any crime, can't harm anybody. Our trends of art should be changed otherwise how can it be told that the cultivation of art forms and shapes human character? Here we see sultan took art to internalize among children. Sultan proposed education on art for all children regardless of socio-economic classes, children of urban area should be brought to rural area, close to nature. When they will draw pictures of rural Bangladesh they will do that out of love as art always comes from love. Therefore, from this activity they would start loving villages, farmers and all natural elements and once they can inculcate the virtue of loving others, they will be able to serve for humanity (Mallik, 2017). Here we see Sultan's uniqueness as he used art to shape human character. He did not

take paintings for beautification rather he took painting as a way to make people virtuous.

Sultan truly understood the importance of developing aesthetic sense among people. He said British and Pakistan ruled us for years but they did not want us to lead a decent life. However, slowly they destroyed our aesthetic sense. High standard of living is impossible for poor but decent life is very much possible for each and every human being. As example Sultan said In Thailand and Indonesia flower garden is visible in each and every house and that represents their aesthetic sense (Shahaduzzaman, 1990). One of the objectives of establishing fine art school was to develop aesthetic sense among students. Therefore it can be said that the educational code of Sultan focuses on individual's cultivation through teaching art with love and aesthetic sense.

4.4 Sultan's Attitude toward Environment

Sultan considered human being as a part of environment, he was aware of the fact that human beings are not alone living on this planet, but they are living among a multitude of animals, plants and inanimate object on earth and this diversity is the real beauty of nature and when somebody can take this beauty inside, then s/he realize the beauty of life. This realization is essentially prerequisite for self cultivation. Sultan says in nature each and every animal seeks for love therefore, we should not be cruel to any animal. Here we see sultans view towards environment is non-anthropocentric approach of morality. Not only human beings but also Sultan loved animals and plants as we found a mini zoo at his home. Sultan was not vegetarian, he used to eat meat, fish therefore it can be said that his idea would be supported by the idea of Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess who developed the idea of deep ecology in environmental ethics. Arne Naess says,

The human and non human lives on earth are valuable by themselves. These values do not depend on the usefulness of human purposes. Humans have the right to reduce the richness and diversity except to satisfy their vital needs (Satyanarayana, 2009).

Here we see Arne Naess talked about the intrinsic value of the non human form of life and human responsibility to give that value. Sultan emphasized on such responsibility but in addition to that he advocated loving them.

4.5 Obligation to Community in the Account of Morality

Through painting Sultan fought for the people of rural Bangladesh, his own community. The sense of obligation to relationship brought him back from America and Europe and inspired him to serve his community till his death. He taught his students to draw the picture of their own environment, own community. The real development of human being is not possible if they don't get chance to see their own environment history and cultural practices from frogs eye view. To bring children close to those things Sultan mainly emphasized on painting. He says we should follow bees as they go to different places to collect honey from flowers and come back to their hive similarly students should go to different places to gather knowledge and come back to serve own community (Hanif, 2017).

In western philosophy Charls Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre and Michael J Sandel are considered as contemporary communitarian philosopher. They claim that "community in which we live should be at the center of our analysis of society and government. They emphasize the social nature of human beings. They argue that our identity—who we are—depends on our relationships to others in our communities. We are embedded in our community and its cultural practices. So we cannot hope to understand ourselves to our government apart from our community and its cultural traditions" (Valasquez, 2011). Sultan highly focused on social relationship in his moral philosophy. Therefore, in Bengali philosophy Sultan should also be considered as a contemporary

communitarian thinker.

4.6 Secularism in Sultan's Thoughts and Paintings

No religious activities could come to Sultan's canvases. He saw human nature from secular point of view. Sultan says fear is so harmful and if it is inserted in children's mind that will exist forever. No good work can be accomplished out of fear. Therefore, we have to keep our children aside from any sort of fear and we also should teach them that good work should be done from the happiness of life. Good work itself can give us pleasure. Each and every child is born with immense potentials but only for the lack of opportunity they cannot flourish themselves. In this regard he says nothing but art can play the most important role to grow empathy and positive attitude among children's mind (Mallik, 2017). Sultan's religious identity was a debatable issue the people of his locality. Some villagers say he is a Hindu and some villagers say he is Muslim. Sultan considered him only an artist (Biswas, 2013). Sultan said, Bengali people have no religion, no prophet but they do have some basic characteristics. They are modest, simple, truthful and hospitable (Shahaduzzaman, 1990). Islam and Hinduism are two major religions of Bengal but no prophet of these religions was Bengali. Therefore, Sultan claimed that Bengali people have no own religion. Considering the subject of Sultans paintings and his view toward religion, it is so evident to say that his moral philosophy is based on secularism.

4.7 Human Figures as the Symbol of Inner Strength

The viewers get staggering experience form Sultans work. The farmers in his canvasses are extraordinary strong with swelling breast. Their figure presents the opposite of what we see in reality. In his time undernourished farmers were haunted by want and disease. When we see his work, we can easily realize that the artist brings out the inner vitality of those farmers. Sultan mainly expressed his courage, hope, strength and his love to the land though human figures and nurture. Each and every human figure shows sultan's confidence in human being. It would be so evident to explain any of his works.



Figure 1 Painting of S M Sultan (Sultan Foundation)

The human figure in the above painting shows the inner strength of farmers for survival where sultan's confidence and hope is also explicit. The viewers also get courage and understand their inner power to survive.

Sultan felt the pain of the peasants and other deprived people in rural society. He experienced that the farmers produce but remain hungry. This reality injured his soul and led him to depict the inner power of producer through his paintings. He mainly fought through art against all sort of injustice.

Sultan claims when children draw picture then they start to love that subject and the inner strength existed in the painting will make them more confident to all sorts of constraints to have a good life.

4.8 Gender Inclusiveness and Social Harmony

Gender inclusiveness, this notion encompasses acceptance and respect to man and women in the society. In Sultans work no gender discrimination and equal participation of man and woman is noticeable. In his art school girls and boys together used to come and Sultan motivated parents to send their children to learn paintings. His paintings also give the same message.



Figure 2 Painting of S. M. Sultan (Sultan Foundation)

In the above painting, man and woman are working together to collect jute fiber. Synergy among group members has happened due to proper respect to each other.

4.9 Shifting Form Ideal Society to Ideal State

The ideal society is a harmonious society and such society can be shaped through developing individual personalities through proper education of art. Art would inculcate love among people and people would spread love to each and every element of the society. People will help each other through love. Individual would consider himself as a part of the society and what is good for him that has to be good at least for his community. From

sultans view we get the idea of an ideal society. His painting also shows that.

From the idea of ideal society Sultan shifted to ideal state. Sultan says the demand of the society should run the state not vice versa (Hossain, 2013). Sultan also talked about ideal world. In a conference at UN Sultan delivered a lecture on world peace. Sultan said being a rich country America spends a lot amount of money to make weapons which are essentially to kill human being. If this amount of money is spent for human welfare, the whole world would be developed like America. If I had a bomb then I would have destroyed all weapon factories and established fine art schools (Hye, 2014).

4.10 Nourishing Empathy through Teaching Art

Now a day's empathy is a well discussed issue to uphold humanity. It is a social and emotional skill to feel and understand others' need. Sultan truly believed that without such feelings human life is valueless. In 1969 he established a fine art school and later on in 1982 he established Shisu Sorgo (Heaven of the children) with government intervention. Every Friday Sultan taught drawing to approximately 300 children at Shisu Sorgo. For children he made one sophisticated boat and with that he took them to enjoy the beauty of nature. The main objective of such journey was to create opportunity so that they can draw the real pictures of nature (Ashraf, 2007). Sultan thinks when a child draws the pictures of farmers, laborers, plants, animals or anything then s/he can feel that and that is necessarily empathy. In personal life he was highly empathetic as we found he left high standard of living at America and Europe and came back to his village, led a very poor life and served villagers till his death.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

The great painter SM Sultan has significantly contributed by ensuring integration between art and moral philosophy. This integration has opened a new dimension of teaching moral education as we see Sultan shows how art can grow empathy inside a person. It is recommended to use art to bring people close to nature through which they would be able to internalize love and this sense would guide them to lead a good life in the society.

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