

Language as a tool in articulating aspects of 'Arupa' the 'Formless' in Design

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This paper was written for presentation in Semiotic seminar in Mysore(Karnataka, India) in 1992. For some reasons I could not attend the seminar. The paper got misplaced and 'sheets with references', could not be recovered. I am able to salvage and add only few references. I thought it is worthwhile to include it in the web site as my current thoughts on 'Form' get connected with the theme and I intend to write few more articles in this frame work - 7th Feb 2023.

Manmade object faces a crisis today. Product obsolescence rooted in mass production and unwarranted consumption by the privileged sections, based on media persuasion have not only caused the ecological damage but also distorted the meaningful relationship of man with objects he uses. In this context, Design faces a formidable challenge as the very act of 'Design' seem to further the prevailing confusion. Deeper search for the very process of creation of objects and understanding the changing relationships of man with the objects, have become important to the field of Design.

Language, especially in the Indian thought-tradition can become an excellent tool in this endeavor.

Interestingly the deep rooted relationships between object and language in terms of human products has been recurring theme of the works of semiologists like Ferruccio Rossi –Landi (1968, 1972a). His argument goes as follows: If one compares language production with material production, one finds relationships which are clear cut homologies (not identities, but not analogies either). The reason is that both language and objects are artifacts. Artifacts are not simply traces left by human activity (like footprints) but change applied to raw material by means of human labour. Human labour in turn is planned and intentional. The labourer must have learned how to differentiate and compose his materials. Thus human sounds are not simply cries, but sounds formed and produced by men!' (Martin Krampen, 161)

Rossi-Landi comes out with ten points of comparison between language and object production. In the ninth point he touches the artistic production. The level of non-repetitive production (in language production original literary, artistic or scientific production in which the model coincides with a single product; in material production realization of a single prototype or small series of special pieces like luxury automobiles or specially planned and executed work cycles.(Morris Charles, 163)

Rossi-Landi's works fail to take cognizance of mythico-religious origins of language. The world of psyche finds no place in his approach. According to Indian thought traditions, 'What language symbolizes is primarily not an external material world but psychic meanings. The world is what we make of our experiences and that making has a necessary reference to the self or consciousness. If language in its ordinary use is a necessary part of Vyavahara (transactions), rightly understood it can be a ladder for mystical self-realization. Language is both Prapancha and Mantra. (R.C. Pande, 202)

We can extend the homology pointed out by Rossi-Landi, between language and object world to the mythico-religious zone based on Indian Thought-Traditions. Thus Language and Objects would have origins in myth. In case of objects like weapons we find ready evidence. Certain weapons, such as the Çakra of Vishnu and Trishula of Siva and Devi, become so intimately connected with particular deities that they can symbolize them or embody part of their character. They may themselves become God's attendants or deities with whom they can be associated... The shapes of these weapons seem to be invested with a power of their own, and they can be given a wide variety of interpretations" (Valerie. J. Roebuck, p.165)

Our present concern here is whether we can extend these traditional thought notions to present situations. The Indian thinking tradition though has unshakeable roots in Vedas, has been dynamic in its interpretation and applications.

"Indian tradition never really digressed from the Vedas, but kept renewing or trying to renew the vision of their originators, the seers (rishis), through spiritual endeavors of its religious leaders, yogis and mystics: and kept expressing their experiences in ever new idioms, sometimes remotely echoing the language of the Vedas, sometimes creating new symbolic imagery and mythology and also, of course, struggling to give them conceptual expression in its philosophical systems" (Philip. S. Rawson, 29)

However, it is important to examine the basic notions in Indian thinking to appreciate and extend the notions. In the Indian thought-tradition as expressed in Vedas and Later in Upanishads as well as Puranas, the Universe is conceived as an expression of the Supreme Being. Known and Unknown, manifested and un-manifested are all aspects of the Supreme Being. The Kena Upanishad while urging the Pupil to go and seek beyond the reach of eye, ear and speech or the touch, describes this absolute Brahman as the ear of the ear, the mind of the mind, speech of the speech, life of the life(breath), the eye of the eye and yet beyond all these. The dialogue repeats this imagery of the eye, ear and mind throughout. Although it is formless and un-manifest, it is only accessible to us by means of the senses or intellect and expresses therefore 'Absolute Knowledge'. (Kapila Vatsayana,12)

Further to this there is a mention of hierarchy starting from the lower places.

- Senses (and their objects)
- Mind (Manas)
- Intellect (Sattavan)
- Great Soul (Mahatma)
- Avyakta (Unmanifested)
- Purusha (Soul)

In the plane of Manas, occur Rupa, Nama (Formal Name) and Arupa (the Formless). Rupa and Nama (Form/shape and Name) are the defined dimensions of the objects, Arupa the formless is the undefined. Arupa is in the realm of patterns that can be actualized as Rupa and Nama occurring at the lower levels (Whorf, p253). Considering the hierarchy suggested in Katha Upanishad, 'Arupa' in the plane of Manas(Mind) would have an epistemic access at the higher plane of Intellect (Sattavan). Language, Myth and the images of mythical origin could provide us the means for such an access.

Our present focus will be how language can become a tool in articulating aspects of Arupa the formless in the context of design. Words in language can be a starting point, the origin of words in a language is closely associated with origins of myths in that culture. Words stand for an intensification of experience, capturing the experience as a symbol. 'Word, in fact becomes a sort of primary force, in which all being and doing originate. In all mythical cosmogonies, as far as they can be traced, the supreme position of the word is found (Cassirer, 45).

Metaphor becomes the intellectual link between the word and the myth. Art which has similar origins is connected with Myth through image. Again metaphors operate through images establishing a close link between Word, Myth and Image. "Myth, Language and Art begin as a concrete individual unity which is only gradually resolved into a triad of independent modes of spiritual creativity" (Cassirer, 98)

Though language and myth enrich each other, over a period due to the influence of 'Power of Logic' in the language, the cohesive power of 'Word and Myth' is weakened. Thus words used in a language become mere conceptual signs. With the loss of deeper meanings inherent in it, the word is often reduced to its dictionary meaning. A similar process can be seen in creation of objects. Initially objects contain images symbolically holding the myths. Over a period 'Objects' go through a logical transformation in a society, subject to its economic and cultural structures. The mythical origins and associated significance are lost in the process. Thus a symbolic object of worship may become a mere artifact.

Thus we see a homology between 'Object Experience' which has lost its original significance to the words in a language which has acquired mere dictionary meaning. Now we can see the significance of Indian notions of Rupa, Nama and Arupa. Arupa, the formless at higher level is the source for Myth, Language and Art. At the level of Rupa and Nama, source of Design, it takes the Names and forms, subject to logical operations, whether in a language or in the material transactions of day to day life in case of objects.

However, words and objects in the current use have dormant meanings. In case of language word or Nama (Name) at lexical level has limited revelation. But sentences and groups of sentences can reveal to a higher degree 'the very concept'. The meanings as used in sentence can uncover higher levels for which a 'Nama' or a 'Name' stands for.

Further, artistic expressions with a group of sentences as in 'poetry or a play' can take us to yet higher levels. Thus word-object metaphoric links as well as the expression in a sentence or group of sentences like in poetry or theatre provide us the means of articulation of 'Arupa' of an object or concept which has manifested with a particular form (Rupa) and Name (Nama).

Taking an example of an object like chair, the various levels of expressions and meanings which lead us to 'Arupa' can be examined.

Chair

The dictionary reference to the object chair is 'a movable seat'.

Chairs have many names by which a particular shape of chair has acquired its identity. Eames Chair, Barcelona Chair, Marilyn Love Seat, Tulip Pedestal Chair, Prague Chair and Sankheda Chair are some examples.

Then we have chairs acquiring identities based on the place where they are used like Dining Chair, Lounge Chair, Garden Chair and Beach Chair.

There are chairs where the names have different connotation depending on the action performed on the person sitting on the chair. Barber's Chair, Dentist's Chair and Electric Chair fall in this category.

The word 'Chair' has also acquired other meanings due to a metaphoric process. Chair in a University or Chairman indicate the positions. In the use like 'Chairing a session' we see the metaphoric transfer to give a new meaning to the word. Sitting at the edge of the chair, seated in a chair are other expressions which bring out the actions in a person which a 'Chair' is supposed to induce.

When we look at Indian Languages we find expressions, 'Kissa KursiKa' (Power is of the Chair) and Simhasana (Throne). Both these words indicate the executive powers of a King or a leader unlike the presiding power of a chairman. 'Simha' means 'Lion' in Sanskrit. Asana means seat. Thus we see images of lion in early chairs. A link to the Indian concept of 'Vahanas' on which each deity resides can also be seen here. Peetha is another reference we find. Peetha is a seat at low level on which you can sit with folded legs. 'Peetha' also stands for the abode of religious leaders. It is a seat of authority of that particular religious sect.

In the Indian Culture, Chair as a daily used object of convenience has been less significant. The various postures of sitting Asanas in Yoga are self reliant. A right posture does not demand a chair.

If we take a look at Chinese culture we find 'Chair of Longevity'. This chair has letter forms as part of its form which symbolizes the alchemical jar. The form of the chair (Rupa) is empowered with Aksharas, Letter forms which symbolize the mystical dimensions. One can imagine early Chinese nobleman sitting in meditation on a chair of longevity.

In recent times, we can see in 'theatre' a creative use of Chair. A play, 'The Chairs.' written by Eugene Ionesco, is a poetic image brought to life – complex, ambiguous, multidimensional. The subject of play Ionesco wrote, "is not the message, not the failure of life, nor the moral disaster of two old people, but the chairs themselves; that is to say, the absence of people, the absence of emperor, the absence of God, the absence of Matter the unreality of the world, metaphysical emptiness, The theme of the play is nothingness..."

Thus we can see the potential of language to reveal cultural and anthropological dimensions of a product, Systematic study of 'Language-Object' relationship can lead to a new method of investigation in revealing 'arupa' of products.

References

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