

Essay

Aura and Memory

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Once a human dies, does the essence of the person die out with them? In order to understand this there needs to be a definition of essence or aura. Everything a person touches, interacts with and sets in motion directly affects the environment around them. This is directly proportionate to the person and the effect they distribute among their peers. It is the residue that animate lives leave on inanimate objects around them. It can be better understood with an example of an earthquake and the magnitude of the tremors. It is also pertinent to look at the changes in the time periods and the baggage that it brings in of the present setting of the society.

The temple of Dakshinewar is an example of such presence. Without diving into the debate of religion, if we consider the stature of Ramkrishna, we understand the essence of the man. He had gained such popularity in the 19th century, people from political to social strata flocked to gain his aura and listen to what he preached. Today the room of Ramkrishna stands in its original place, maintained and regulated by the temple committee, but there has been a decline in the aura of the man. The commercialization of that space after the pandemic has been maintained as if to create a distance between divinity and people. What that has done in turn is, create chaos in a previously calmer state of being. So is there an erosion of essence in this situation? Because the concept of essence is abstract, the only parameter is the memories of individuals of the past. Memory at best is murky, and at its worst makes changes to the original according to the needs of the individual. Then a human becomes a mosaic of projections of memory and the remaining of the essence after their death.

Hauntological evidence is the effect which transpires from the loss of aura from the buildings that the person inhabits. A person without the context and influences of the history first-hand is likely to be motivated by the memories of the residents and the community that propagates the once living quarters of that aura. What remain are the collective stories, the same way stories were propagated around a bon-fire, and how the whole body of oral literature came into being. "In the divine world the central process or movement is that of the death and rebirth, or the disappearance and return, or the incarnation and withdrawal, of a god." (Frye, p175) The creation of god or god-like structures inside a deterministic society that wants to label, mold, and inherently change the basic function of the object then becomes a myth, a fable not related to the original definition but carrying all the original value in a capitalistic social superstructure.

The city of Pompeii is another example of such aura. The frozen in time lava cast skeletons of 79AD showcase such horror and transience of death, the tourists can feel the aura. It is also same with what millions of Indian today feels about Jallianwala Bagh killings by the British officials. But in both cases, the phenomenon has taken place because the capitalistic values of these sites have not been altered. It is the scarring more than soothing hence keeping the sites in its original form serves the societal purpose of representation more than giving them newer shapes.

What happens as a result is the subtle manipulation of the mindscape and psyche of the visitors experiencing the geographic location for the first time. The ideology, with which a political refugee had first built his house in a piece of land, now becomes a pilgrimage. The identity thus transfers from a ideological to anthropocentric. M.K Gandhi had built his ashram in Sabarmati purely out of resistance and to evoke a sense of identity for Indians which he thought was best beyond the grasp of colonial erasure of identities. Today Sabarmati ashram stands covered in marbles, with decorated staircase and illustrated colourful walls. So is it still Gandhi's ashram? Or is it now a public holiday destination? The loss of aura is a result of capitalization of that essence. Keeping the name and removing the structure, if we may.

The opposite can be observed with misanthropes. People who had completely discarded the company of human beings, people like Johnathan Swift who consistently labelled and represented the flaws of the society also have the essence left after he has died. Poets, authors, and artists who suffered from serious clinical depression and eventually either committed suicide or secluded themselves from the society have had their essence preserved in the works they produced. Every part of their aura trapped inside the creative expression they had brought on.

Stories that keep on repeating do not remain the same stories, as pointed out by Badal Sircar in his play Ballavpurer Roopkatha⁽²⁾. In a fast paced late-capitalist society, the essence remains the sole commodity for non-commodity items to be marketable. The aura hence also becomes a currency, which like the physical counterpart, meta-morph with time; just like it happened with William Shakespeare,

and Rabindranath Tagore. The buildings which they resided in, then, become the culmination of external affectations through time ultimately reflecting the memories of people visiting the physical buildings. This in alienates the original essence of these buildings even more. The more time pass, the buildings become symbolic more than real, losing their original aura and is worse than mimesis. The lost-in-translation aura of these establishments then become only what is defined by the institutions and power structures.

This becomes increasingly frustrating to decipher and it is the question of tradition vs modernity. The whole debate then resides on whether any archeological work done holds any value, because for the simple fact that it is done by institutions that do not carry the same essence of the objects and aura that is being restored.

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