

Tagore's Paintings: a Creation of *Genius*ⁱ

Rajdeep Konar

Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India

Abstract

Standing even at his 150th birth anniversary, there still remains a tendency to see Rabindranath Tagore's paintings as "aberrations" to his aesthetic creed. This article makes an attempt at understanding the "thought gesture" behind Tagore's paintings and thus relocating them in his personal tradition of art. This argues that the significance of Tagore's painting will be fully realized not in a minute technical analysis of his painting. There have been numerous attempts at asserting judgmental views on Tagore's paintings concerning the absence of any "methodological approach" to his painting. Rather, the pertinent questions which should be posed are: Why did Tagore essentially began painting? And why did he paint what he did? These questions could lead us towards comprehending the potentially infinite "thought gesture" which lies beneath the finite, pragmatic act of painting. This could let us into a greater understanding of his act of painting as not an event of 'exception' but as a development of the very ideas and concepts which constituted his consciousness in whatever he did.

[**Keywords:** painting, methodology, artist, development, causes]

"Genius is our life not in so far as it was originated by us; but rather in so far as we originate from it".
—Giorgio Agamben, "Genius", *Profanations*.

The history of Rabindranath Tagore's almost epiphanic burst into the world painting scene at the twilight of his years, has been an oft repeated affair and is a phenomenon which has through the years attracted much speculation and analysis. The apocryphal nature of some of these seems astounding. A much celebrated art critic like Partha Mitterⁱⁱ has attempted to explain the act through a Freudian *psycho-analytic* paradigm, denying any conscious *agency* on part of the poet and suggesting it as a fulfillment of juvenile fantasy, extending the logic to the extent of labeling him as a *surrealist* and thus locating him in the discourse of early 20th century *avant-garde* art (it is yet another matter that Mitter even fails to create a definition for the term *avant garde* in his whole book). Mitter even brings in a dubious and momentous rendezvous between Freud and Tagoreⁱⁱⁱ to the support of his cause. Such instances are replete with unwarranted use of categorizing terms like amateur, juvenile, dilettante to Tagore's act of painting. Opposed to this there have been sporadic attempts on one hand to bust these *myths*^{iv} on part of thinkers like K G Subramanyan, and in a more positive sense attempts at initiating a process of *de-exceptionalising* Tagore's painting from his "author-function"^v by trying to associate it with the nature of the poet's thoughts and deeds in other domains of his activity.^{vi} However, disappointingly enough, even when we are celebrating the 150th birth anniversary of our esteemed poet

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there has been a complete absence of any such critical work which has made an attempt to analyze the origin of his paintings in the very ideas and thoughts which generally populated his consciousness. Tagore's paintings have mostly been seen as *aberrations* to his natural thought procedure. In this short essay my aim would not be so much in discussing the technicalities of his painting in details but rather it will be an attempt at understanding the thought "gesture"^{vii} behind Tagore's paintings and thus relocate them in his personal tradition of art. I would like to argue that the significance of Tagore's paintings will be fully realized not in a minute technical analysis of his painting but trying to comprehend his painting as a realization of a *thought gesture*. There have been numerous attempts at asserting judgmental views on Tagore's paintings concerning the absence of any methodological approach to his painting or the contrary which I feel as a completely ridiculous activity. As Michel Foucault has repeatedly stressed it is not "what" but "why" which should be the pertinent question in an archival discourse. The questions which should be posed are: Why did Tagore essentially began painting? And why did he paint these specific paintings? It is these questions which would lead us towards comprehending the potentially infinite "thought gesture" which lies beneath the finite, pragmatic act of painting. This would let us into a greater understanding of his act of painting as a not an event of 'exception' but as a development of the very ideas and concepts which constituted his *consciousness* in whatever he did.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) was India's greatest poet and the first non-European to receive the Nobel Prize for literature. Apart from being a poet he was a philosopher, an educationalist, an economist, a theatre director, the founder of a university among many other things by the 1920's when his paintings began to flower. There is an anecdote recounted by Pramathanath Bishi, a student at Santiniketan, later a writer. He once in Asram Vidyalaya performed a "*jatra*"^{viii} with his fellow students. Tagore saw the act and revealed his intentions of writing a *jatra* later to Bishi. Bishi responded with these words- "You haven't left anything for us lesser talents to pursue; please at least leave *Jatra* for us"^{ix}. Tagore seems to have benevolently complied with his wishes. So, most of these things have already happened and Tagore is a phenomenon by the time at the age of almost seventy his talents in yet another form of art first came to the notice of the world. It was in 1924 which fixes the exact age of he poet as 63.

A preliminary fact which becomes evident as we try to engage with the responses to Tagore's paintings is that there is a consistent attempt at a denial of, or justification for their existence. What this indicates is an anxiety which Tagore's painting produced in their critical respondents. This anxiety in turn signals to the presence of something in the Tagore's paintings which has been very difficult to come to terms with, something of an excess, a *non-totalisable element* which has tended to disturb the coordinates of things. Before proceeding towards answering what is that element I would now digress a bit to see another

instance of painting similar to that of Tagore, generating completely contrasting responses. This instance I think would help us answer the question we are to address. When renowned Italian film-maker Michaelangelo Antonioni's Landscape paintings came to be exhibited much later in his life when he has already produced many of his cinematic masterpieces it did not seem to produce much turmoil in the minds of critics^x. This instance can be taken to be interpreted in numerous ways but what would seem a very conspicuous reason for this is that Antonioni even as a film-maker was a visual artist and his landscape paintings were very much in tandem with his style of artistic vision that we come across in his films. Thus it was easily accepted that his activity of painting was something of a complementary to his artistic process of film-making. This gives us a hint towards defining a very primary point of the genesis of the anxiety in case of Tagore. First of it, Tagore was primarily a literary artist before he started painting. We have to understand the fact that Tagore was intimating a new language of art abandoning a language that he had used to express himself the first seventy years of his life and very successfully too. This is one of the very primary *enigmas* that the critics were faced with. A person who has not gone through a proper training of techniques in an artistic language trying to speak in that language desperately in spite of the fact that he has at his disposal another artistic language which he has honed his skills in to become a master of. It is indeed a very strange situation.

It is indeed an interesting fact about Tagore's painting that they began with an erasure of his poems in form of doodles as we all know now. It would have been another matter if Tagore was treating his painting as only child's play. But there are evidences to the contrary. Tagore, in a poem written to Sudhindranath Dutta mentions-

"Words do not pamper me, her rule is strict; my lines laugh at their will, they do not restrict me..."^{xi}

In a series of letters written in the 1930's we find Tagore conveying similar feelings. He writes to Indira Devi from Santiniketan-

"I was very busy. Now Holidays have begun. I am thinking of just to sit in a corner and paint. I don't feel like using my pen..."^{xii}

Writes to Pratima Devi-

"Practically these days I am not writing at all. When I get free moments, I paint..."^{xiii}

In Rani Chanda's book we find-

"I wish I could do away with all other things and just paint. I truly feel in my life today an urge, to paint..."^{xiv}

There are many more such references where Tagore expresses his reservations with words and his feeling of freedom when painting and his choosing painting over writing as an act. This brings into the equation a matter of choice of one

language over the other. This makes it clear, that when Tagore began painting, he felt unable to express his mind freely in words and was looking forward to painting seriously as an alternative. This indicates a void which was getting created in his thoughts, a sense of incompleteness and dissatisfaction with the *potentialities* of the written word. It would be interesting to investigate the origin of this *void*.



Now, if this sudden urge of Tagore to express himself in an artistic language that's technical minutiae he had no idea of, baffled the critics, the nature of his paintings exponentially multiplied that bafflement. Tagore began painting at a time when he was seeing around him in Santiniketan painters like Nandalal Bose, Ramkinker Baij and Benondbihari Mukherjee. His own brothers Abanindranath and Gaganendranath were eminent painters. He could not have been unaware of paintings by Jamini Roy. However to the surprise of the critics his paintings showed no influence whatsoever, neither technical, nor stylistic nor thematic, of any of his

contemporaries, which would have been perhaps very natural for any lesser being. As time would permit it, in paintings of the mentioned painters we see an allegiance towards a nationalist ideology, an attempt at representing the national past in these paintings; but not in Tagore. If this was a refutation of the external influences, the aesthetics of his paintings even did not seem to follow the tradition of his own literary aesthetics. Tagore had always maintained a certain kind of euphemistic gracefulness in his writings. He was often allegorical and symbolic but not to the extent of being 'unreal'. His paintings however seemed very unreal to the critics to the extent that he was termed a surrealist. It seems they were at a loss to locate the origin of these dark, strange and grotesque figures and found it best to describe its genesis in form of childhood dreams or attempted to draw a feeble link back to his literary aesthetics in terms of "rhythm". It is thus that Tagore's paintings have been mostly carefully kept at the margin of things with an occasional servile remark of appreciation from his ardent followers at Santiniketan.

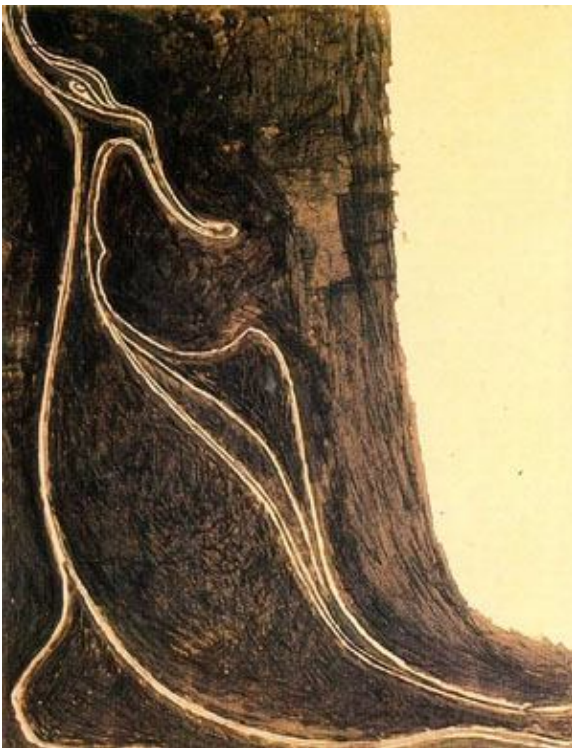
Tagore, "Untitled", Two figures in doodles



Jamini Roy, "Mother-Child"



Abanindranath Tagore, "The Journey's End"



Tagore, "Untitled", Fantastic bird



Tagore, "Untitled", Figure

Tagore's act of beginning painting has seemed extremely significant and bearing the mark of a very distinct juncture in the development of his thought. They do so not in spite of their apparent refutation to take into consideration any immediate external influence; but simply because they do so. One of the very easy yet tempting ways through which these paintings can be assimilated in to his artistic canon is the much clichéd romanticist allegation that Rabindranath has been often charged with. If it would be a blunder to call Tagore as a romanticist from his literary production, it would be even more so to explain his paintings through such a classification. From the very beginning of Tagore's literary activities we always notice a struggle, a negotiation between a romantic impulse and an impulse to serve an *external truth*, if in a general sense we can call it being political. When Tagore has often repeatedly pointed out that the artist is a creator and that the sole point of *immanence* of *truth* is the artists imagination, essentially a romantic relationship between truth and art where *truth* is *multiple* and *immanent* in nature; in implication he has also often served social and political causes in his writings, where the *truth* necessarily as we can call have been an *external singular* one and not *immanent*^{xv}. It seems that the very importance of his paintings lie in the fact that Tagore achieves the very significant reconciliation of these two contradictory tendencies in his paintings.

For the explanation of such an assertion I have to first trace the terrain of Tagore's thoughts at a time when he begins to feel the over-whelming urge to paint as he says. It is around 1920's that this happens. If we see there has been a significant rupture in Tagore's thinking processes during this time. In the first decade of the twentieth century we find Tagore very closely associated with the political movements in Bengal against the British colonial regime. In 1905 the Bengal partition movement happens and perhaps we see Tagore at his political best- writing songs, arranging 'sobha-jatras', voicing his protests against this tyrannical act of the colonial British government. We find him intoxicated in the hope of a possible rebellion against the colonial British Government. However as gradually we enter the second decade of the 20th century we find him in a process of gradual disenchantment from the frenzy of the Nationalist movement. He gets the Nobel in 1913 and when he finds the very same public who had criticized him earlier making an overnight shift to voice his admiration, he finds it distasteful. He sees the nationalist struggle being turned into a farce by providing the subject for leisurely evening socializing along with the consumption of Darjeeling tea and Scotch whisky in homes of Bengali aristocrat 'babus'. He feels concerned with the growing rift between the Hindu and Muslim communities at a time when there unity is the most desirable. In the mean-while he makes repeated trips to Europe, America and South East Asia. He is confronted with the aggressive nationalist politics of nations^{xvi}. In 1914 the First World War is declared. All of this culminates to create a crisis in his stream of thoughts. As it seems evident in his correspondences with Gandhi he feels disillusioned with the nationalist movement by encountering the evils of Nationalist politics, the very

seeds of which as he declares in his famous essay on nationalism are infested in the essentially western concept of development through *competition*. He comprehends that by its own nature a competitive paradigm creates *oppositions*, which extend to become *enemies*. Thus the concept of *competitive* development by its very nature breeds violence. Thus Tagore became skeptical of surrender to a mass ideology. As opposed to this he began thinking if there can be a process of development for a human being not by competing with his fellow human beings but through a process a self enlightenment, self development. He was proposing a development which is not generated or controlled by external influences but comes from within the *being*. This was a point of rupture in Tagore's thoughts. A consequence of this rupture was that Tagore's thoughts began to get more concerned with what he thought as the internal part of the *self* than with the external part of it.

Now if we think a bit carefully, we would be able to detect that when Tagore is proposing a process of an internal development for a being, a development which *emanates* from within he is essentially talking in a *romantic schemata* which deifies the human as the ultimate creative being. However this time he does not stop at this much. He takes a step further to form a link between such a romantic concept and a much more politically motivated idea of *universalism*. He proposes a universal being, a being who would develop within himself but who would draw his immediate functionality from a responsibility towards the universe, towards mankind in general. His allegiance would not be to ultimately be with any person, community, state or nation but with the human race. This loyalty to the human race would define his every action. It is thus that Tagore strives to find reconciliation between the two opposite poles of his allegiance romantic and political. In short he tries to propose a *schemata* for his *universal being* where the *truth* is essentially *singular* and at the same time *immanent* in nature. It is quite a remarkable and interesting fact that Tagore too was trying to achieve what the avant-garde artists around the world of the 20th century were trying to do^{xvii}. It is in this sense that we may call Tagore an *avant-garde* artist.

It is at such a point of rupture in Tagore's thought that the void or dissatisfaction around the written language came into existence. Very interestingly it evolved in quite a similar manner as Tagore's proposed universal being. As Tagore prescribes for his *universal being* a development which begins with the development of the inner self by nourishment and appeasement of the natural abilities and urges; resulting later in establishing a bigger linkage with the universe consequently; similarly Tagore's exodus of painting begins with a nourishment of inner self later to be completed by being re-thought in its greater political significance. At the beginning, as Tagore mentions, he paints only to satisfy an urge which is internal but later on he realizes the political potential that his paintings possess. We find him saying in his letters that his literary activities are so much steeped in cultural specificities that it can never communicate to an

audience foreign to them and thus painting he understood can be the only medium which could provide him with a license to do so. He writes: "In pictures, or in plastic art, the material consists of the representation of things which are in a way familiar to most people and can easily be apprehended by every one ... This is why it is much more difficult for a foreigner to understand foreign music than to appreciate foreign art." ^{xviii}

Painting for Tagore becomes the language through which he looks to communicate *universally*. A very prominent trait of Tagore's paintings is that, they try to do away with all kinds of immediate particularities: technical or thematic. He refuted traditional techniques^{xix} and refused to entertain an immediate sense of socially or culturally informed reality. Tagore's paintings are mostly *figural* in nature. The figures are meant to be almost *archetypal* and *universal*. There is an attempt at reaching out towards an art which is universal in nature in terms of it being comprehended irrelevant of the boundaries of language, culture and nations. A very interesting incident that would second such a proposition is an interview of Tagore with Russian critics happened in the occasion of Tagore's paintings being exhibited in Tretyakov gallery^{xx}. When asked whether Tagore would like to name his paintings, Tagore replied in the negative. Now, when we have realized that Tagore tried to impart his act of painting with a political significance we must also try to comprehend that the significance of his politics of universalism does not lie in its universal nature but in its being a response to a particular historical contingency. It was a time when it was necessary for the inhabitants of this world to understand things in a bigger context coming out of their tapered loyalties, to foresee the destruction of the human race in such impulses. It was a time to realize oneself as a member of the human race, and comprehend one's responsibility towards its existence.

An analysis of the *thought gesture* behind his Tagore's act of painting can however never be complete before we have discussed another equally significant facet of this act. It is a well known fact that Tagore refuted many clichéd *traditions* of his day. He rebelled against the prevailing colonial education system setting up his own school at Santiniketan *Bramha-vidyalaya*, and when even could not prevent that from falling into to a trap of clichés he founded another one at Sriniketan^{xxi}. He abandoned the contemporary urban colonial theater tradition to set up a completely new kind of theatre in Santiniketan^{xxii}. He introduced women into dancing in his theatre when dancing for women was considered an obscene act, a subject of strict prohibition for the Bengali women belonging to *respected families*. When he saw the national freedom movement being appropriated by the opportunists who were strangling it, he criticized it and distanced himself from what seemed to him a meaningless activity. Tagore thus had innate in him a revolutionary nature, a natural urge to refute all kinds clichés and what he understood as not right and in this light *painting was an ultimate act of rebellion-a rebellion against the self*. The urge to break down, to deconstruct what was unacceptable in his artistic tradition. This monumental task that Tagore imparts

upon himself and throws himself with gusto towards its realization at the age of seventy speaks volumes about the revolutionary spirit in his mind. This is precisely the very reason I think speaking about Tagore's paintings is extremely necessary at this historical juncture. We are still to comprehend the gravity of this act or gesture on behalf of the poet at the very evening of his life.

A very interesting fact about Tagore's paintings which has so long gone completely unidentified but contains immense potential of being analyzed in this context is a strong sense of *performativity* which accompanies Tagore's act of painting. Tagore at multiple occasions has repeated the series of psychological and physical actions which culminates to his painting activity.

He began painting quite early in the morning. In the table in front of his chair he used to arrange varied kinds of colors and brushes. Tucking up his shirt sleeves and sitting pretty composed he began painting. First outlines used to be drawn with pen on paper and then layers of colours used to be applied over them. He often used the other end of the tip of the pen to make scratches on the paper and even applying colours with his finger when he felt the need to....While painting he seemed to have cut off all associations with his immediate surrounding, concentrating on the painting alone, trying to give it a shape and form.....^{xxiii}



Tagore, "Untitled", Woman figure

These descriptions indicate Tagore being possessed by a tremendous desire to paint, before he set down to paint. A tremendous urge, a *void* is created in his mind which is only satisfied by a physical action in terms of a painting. Tagore repeatedly mentions in his writings that he is almost as if possessed by the very painting which demands an existence through him, a painting about whose particularities he has no idea of, but a painting which exists in its very absence, which then takes shape freely through his hands. He is almost made to impart existence to the painting which would torment and haunt him until he salvages it through a finite physical form. He brings something that is *inform*^{xxiv} to *form*. What is most important such kind of a process that he describes is the very *performative* nature of the artistic activity which a modernist avant-garde

artist like Antonin Artaud has persistently harped on. Such kind of an artistic process is called *performative* in nature because of its very volatile, unpredictable nature. Where nothing is pre-structured by things always remain at a *thresh-hold* of being only to be given existence by an *accident*. There is nothing pre-supposed, every thing is impregnated with a sense of immediacy and a *momentariness*. The ultimate *avant-garde* act of defiance against the very conscious agency of our thought, a process always challenging the mind in its imagination.

In the end, therefore Tagore's act of painting can well be called *the ultimate act of defiance*: the act of rebelling against limitations posed by one's own self, there by opening oneself to the infinite potential of genius which always has the capability to generate the new. This is for Tagore is the only way for development for the 'universal being' he was trying to conceive of. A being whose competitor does not reside in his external *other* but in his internal *other* which is what he already is, as opposed to the *being* which is always defined by the infinitely unrealized *potential* of what more or less he can also become. This is precisely what Greeks alluded as the *genius* of a person.^{xv} Tagore's act of painting celebrates this "genius".

End Notes

ⁱ See, the essay "Genius", pg.9-18, from Giorgio Agamben's book *Profanations*

ⁱⁱ See, the Chapter titled "Rabindranath Tagore's Vision of Art and the Community", pg.65-99, in Partha Mitter's *India's artists and the avant-garde 1922–1947*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Partha Mitter's in his book *India's artists and the avant-garde 1922–1947*, writes on this encounter- "Intoxicated with the charisma he(Tagore) exuded; he courted adulation, a weakness partly caused by his failing health. He alienated Freud by inviting him to visit him at his hotel in Vienna where he was staying on 25 October 1926, which Freud did, but the father of psychoanalysis was not amused by Tagore's forwardness." See pg, 68.

^{iv} See, the article by Subramanyan, K.G. "The Amateur and the Professional- Some Issues Raised by Rabindranath's paintings" from the book *Rabindranth Tagore and the Challenges of Today*, eds. Bhudeb Chaudhuri and K. G. Subramanyan.

^v Michel Foucault proposes such a neologism in his essay, "What Is an Author?" It refers to the discursive subject of the author created through discourse as opposed to his existence as a being. See the article in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, pp. 141-160.

^{vi} Somendranath Bandopadhyay in his book *Rabindra-Chitrakala: Rabindra Sahityer Patabhumika*, Devi Prasad in his *Rabindranath Tagore :Philosophy of Education and Paining and more recently* Amrit Sen in an article "Beyond Borders: Rabindranath Tagore's Paintings and Visva-Bharati".

^{vii} "We call gesture what remains unexpressed in each expressive act". Giorgio Agamben in the article "The author as Gesture" from the book *Profanations*, pg.66.

^{viii} "Jatra" is a popular, traditional performance form of Bengal.

^{ix} See, Bishi Pramathanath, *Rabindranath O Santiniketan*. Translation mine.

^x See, the chapter titled "Beyond the movement-image" from the book *Cinema II: The Time Image* by Gilles Deleuze.

^{xi} The poem was published in the collection, *Sesh Saptak*(1934) See, pg. 35, Somendranath Bandopadhyay's book *Rabindra-Chitrakala: Rabindra Sahityer Patabhumika*

^{xii} 23/09/1938, "Chitihipatra" 5, translation my own. See pg. 37 in Somendranath Bandopadhyay's book.

^{xiii} 1930, "Chithipatra" 3, translation my own. See pg. 37 in Somendranath Bandopadhyay's book.

^{xiv} 3rd September 1934, "Alapchari Rabindranath", translation my own. See pg. 37 in Somendranath Bandopadhyay's book.

^{xv} See, the article "Art and philosophy", pg.7, 8 from Alain Badiou's book *Handbook of Inaesthetics* for the explanation of terms like immanence, singular, multiple in context of artistic creation.

^{xvi} See Rabindranath Tagore's essay titled "Nationalism"(The Penguin Book India edition)

^{xvii} See, the article "Art and philosophy", pg.7, 8 from Alain Badiou's book *Handbook of Inaesthetics* for the explanation of terms like immanence, singular, multiple.

^{xviii} Written in Villeneuve, 24 June 1926, 'Sangitchinta'. See pg. 68 of Somendranath Bandopadhyay's book.

^{xix} There is an anecdote on Tagore's refusal to intimate any systematic study of technique for his paintings. Kalabhabvana then had already become an integral part of Santiniketan Ashram-Vidyalaya under the supervision of Acharya Nandalal. Numerous artists were honing their skills under Nandalal at that time at Santiniketan. Surrounded by all these Tagore was unflustered in his intent of creating an independent and novel art form for himself in his paintings for a long time. However, perhaps in one of his more insecure moments Tagore conveyed to Nandalal his desire of learning anatomy to bring an amount of perfection to his paintings. Nandalal responded in the negative with a curt "no need". However in due course, Nandalal did prepare a Sketch book for Tagore putting a lot of effort into it. It contained the anatomical styles human limbs collected from various painting traditions throughout the human history. When Nandalal handed this sketch-book to Tagore, for his practice this time it was Tagore's turn to show a similar brevity in response-"Good work , keep it with you."

^{xx} See, pg 218, Somendranath Bandopadhyay's book *Rabindra-Chitrakala: Rabindra Sahityer Patabhumika*.

^{xxi} See, *Rabindranath Tagore: Philosophy of Education and Painting* by Devi Prasad.

^{xxii} See, the article "IN SEARCH OF A NEW LANGUAGE FOR THEATRE" by Abhijit Sen,in *India Perspectives*,VOL 24 NO. 2/2010

^{xxiii} Dhirendrakrishna Debvarma, in *Shilpismriti: Chitroshilpi Rabindranath, Smritipote*, Visva-Bharati, translation my own. See, Pg. 232 in Somendranath Bandopadhyay's book *Rabindra-Chitrakala: Rabindra Sahityer Patabhumika*

^{xxiv} Alain Badiou in his lecture "the Subject of Art" given at the Deitch lecture project on 04/01/2005 uses the term "inform" to suggest a concept that is the antithesis of a form in any artistic creation.

^{xxv} See, the essay "Genius", pg 9-18, from Giorgio Agamben's book *Profanations*.

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Rajdeep Konar is pursuing M.Phil. in Center for Theatre and Performance Studies at the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India. Email: rajdeep.konar@gmail.com
