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Art As A Ruling Principle In Exploring The Cultural Memory And Queer Identity

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Abstract: Art and Memory are considered as the collective remembrances and interpretations of shared experiences, traditions, and narratives. They serve as a foundational framework through which individuals and societies construct and negotiate their identities. This study investigates how art (painting) as a cultural memory influences the formation, maintenance, and transformation of culture and self-identity across various contexts, including literature, culture, and memory studies. It delves into the intricate relationship between art, cultural memory and self-identity as depicted in the novel *Artist, Undone* by V. Sanjay Kumar. This paper explores how the author himself navigates his sense of identity, instilling the importance of painting in finding one's real self. The research illuminates how personal and cultural identity is shaped, passed over, and sometimes challenged and preserved by art. This research on art, culture, and memory provides a unique cultural perspective on the art market and how contemporary art and narratives on art preserve the memories of an individual and the whole of a culture. An interdisciplinary analysis and theoretical inquiry help the study aim to deepen the understanding of the potentially positive and multifaceted relationship between art, literature, identity, and memory, shedding light on the complexities of human experiences and social belonging.

Index Terms - Art, Cultural memory, Queer, Identity, Spatial memory.

I. INTRODUCTION

Memory, individually and collectively is a key register of our temporalized time. It is for storing information about the past and helps us preserve past events. The word culture usually relates to the shared values, faith and practices, symbols and manners encircling features such as linguistics, religion, customs, art, music, and literature. It is dynamic and a complex phenomenon which shapes individual identities, world views and interaction within the society. Cultural memory is a remembrance and representation of past within the broader context of culture and its memories. It uses variety of media to remember and preserve their past memories in present and also in future. How does cultural memory as a dynamic process of memory recreation help in preserving cultural identity of an individual as well as the whole nation represented by the individual? The significance of cultural memory studies lies in its distinctive approach towards culture and memory, creating a unique space of research on important cultural aspects that surrounds every individual across the nation. The objectives of this research paper lies in its core aspects of how memory recreation through art helps in retrieving cultural identities.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW:

Memory is usually perceived as a thing or possession in which it leads our being and helps our ways of understanding ourselves and each other. In his book *Cultural Memory and Early Civilizations*, the author asserts that "The art of memory relates to the individual and presents techniques to help form personal memory" (Assman 16). This research focuses on V. Sanjay Kumar, an Indian author, born in Karaikudi, grew up in Chennai, but spent a respective part of his life in Mumbai working as an investment banker and a

software entrepreneur. The debut novel *Artist, Undone* by V. Sanjay Kumar exposes the art world through an individual's perspective on the meaning of art but also involves various other equally important characters that interact on art and memory. It delves into the world of contemporary Indian art, weaving a narrative that explores the complex relationship between cultural memory, artistic expression, and the commodification of art. The study involves the artistic approach discussing the reality of being and the investigation of identity.

III. METHODS:

The research methods used for the study on art and cultural memory are qualitative research method and theoretical approaches focusing on the cultural aspects of the selected novel. The research framework addresses the research problem and also helps in finding the proper research solution with respect to the concerns raised and discussed in the research paper. The study tries to utilize the themes of memory, desire, and the art market forces impacting art to explore the evolving cultural landscape of India with the particular focus on the cultural memory and queer identity in the novel. The creation of art is used as a methodological framework here to place the study of cultural memory within the paradigm of memory recreation. Focusing on the reflective aspect of art and memory, this research helps to understand that cultural memory as practices of remembrance and also dealing with the past in the present that is embodied and mediated through art.

IV. RESULTS:

The results of the research study includes a clear understanding of the research theme chosen for the study where identity-formation of the characters both culturally and individually is read and revealed throughout the discussion part.

V. DISCUSSION:

This research paper on the novel *Artist, Undone* uses art as a ruling principle in analyzing the cultural identities of the characters involved in the narrative and also the author's own experiences relating to the art world alongside. The research focuses on cultural memory with autobiographical elements through special perspective emphasizing the role of memory processes in the construction of cultural and self-identity alongside such cultural norms and concepts of culture. With the domain of memory processes and their cultural effects cultural memory here acts as essential morality of the authors relation to the past in the present rather than a transparent lens through which all the past in the past remains visible. Memory is not just site of representations of events and experiences that are shared by the author through his narratives rather the same as away lasting traces of the past that persist in the present by the transmission and persistence of cultural elements that revolves around his cultural background.

The novel, *Artist, Undone* chosen for study documents the reality of the art world and its market culture. The author focuses on the impacts of the art world on the protagonist, Harsh Sinha, a disillusioned advertising executive who impulsively buys a self-referential portrait by Nataraj Sharma. He almost loses everything, his home, his wife, and daughter deciding to buy that expensive painting for 27 plus lakhs. He sees himself through the painting. It is of a topless man, sitting amongst the flora. This act further leads to the protagonist's realization later. From his incessant desire to buy such an art to eventually accept and acknowledge his queer identity. Harsh learns to enjoy his life at the end of this novel. Stumbling into the art market to sell off that painting he associates his assistant Roongta to help him on visiting local art galleries in Mumbai (Jehangir Art Gallery). What was first taken as a sabbatical away from his corporate work life turns into an art sabbatical. The novel deals with the anxieties and aspirations surrounding art in modern India. The third chapter in the novel deals with Harsh's struggle to sell the painting.

V. Sanjay Kumar in his novel, *Artist, Undone*, through Harsh's journey, portrays the culture of Mumbai by depicting the local streets, restaurants and private art galleries. The role of Harsh Sinha tries to bring out the intricacies of the art market. Sometimes he finds himself hooked by it and also it challenges him in understanding the contemporary art world. He takes it as liberation, willing to explore a new market seeing art as redemption. Harsh expresses his perplexity and curiosity towards art market stating that:

"For me, it's liberation," I told him. I honestly believed it. After many, many years I was willing to explore a market, study it like I used to and understand its nuts and bolts. After many years I wanted to believe in something new and very different". (Kumar 38).

There are separate characters throughout the narrative, muddling their way out to life through art, but the way in which the author tries to connect them all together with the protagonist's life sounds perfect and logical but never forced. The author's own perception on art based on his life experiences reflects

throughout the novel. The whole novel is itself seen as a memory documented by the author which encompasses his cultural aspects and of the cultural identity that he yearns for.

While Harsh Sinha occupies the central stage, a critical supporting character, Newton Kumaraswamy, deserves closer examination. Through Newton, author explores the concept of cultural memory and its impact on artistic expression in contemporary India. Newton is a painter constantly entangled with the ghost of the legendary Indian artist, Francis Newton Souza. Newton's artistic style is heavily derivative, often bordering on plagiarism. Newton's inability to break free from Souza's shadow reflects the challenges faced by contemporary artists grappling with the weight of artistic legacies. Their artistic voices are being stifled by the need to live up to the established canon, hindering the development of a distinct artistic identity.

Newton's success, however, lies precisely in his ability to cater to the market's desire for a sanitized version of Souza's rebellion. The market embraces the shock value of Souza's work but dilutes its critical message. Newton, in turn, becomes a cog in this system, perpetuating a shallow echo of Souza's revolutionary spirit. Despite his flaws, Newton remains a critical figure in the narrative. His presence acts as a constant reminder of the challenges faced by artists in their quest for individual expression. His paintings serve as a fascinating lens through which to examine the complex relationship between cultural memory and artistic expression in contemporary India. By highlighting the challenges of navigating artistic legacy and the potential pitfalls of commercialization, *Artist, Undone* provokes critical reflection on the role of artists in shaping cultural narratives and pushes readers to question the true meaning of artistic innovation.

The field of Art Market Studies for the contemporary art plays an important role. Particular attention has been shown in the globalization of the art market when Newton Kumaraswamy tries to display his art exhibit in New York. Art historians and critics explain the spread of contemporary art as the market by noticing how exponentially it has grown in the last generation. Commercial trends influence modern practices and the effects on how people perceive art and its appeal in the present. Artists in the recent era have figured out ways to push boundaries in order to produce the most captivating work. On the other hand, art markets have also been rigorously commercialized now more than ever. Artists fight against their own prejudices to come out distinctively unaffected, displaying their work as stand-alone creations that are culturally representative and also self-representative.

Painting in this novel acts as a means of validating the self-identities of the characters. Art challenges the static notions of identity. It engages the viewers in visual narratives which are first unfamiliar to them and then educate their previously held notions. Art tries to provide life to the past. It helps the memories to be visualized, touched, walked through, and identified as being part of a culture. It always leaves a metaphoric identity statement. The power, a work of art communicates, stands the test of time. In the novel chosen for study, painting plays a vital role for every character to set the narrative in play. The protagonist researches art in depth as he is much involved in learning a new market that beguiled him so much. The characters that are involved with art would all seem like several threads disconnected initially, but as the novel progresses they seem to become a decipherable pattern connecting all of them together through art.

The novel uses a range of characters interlinked to one another through a connecting plot where every character undeniably interacts with the world of art psychologically, financially and emotionally revolving around the storyline. This paper deals with two most important characters Harsh Sinha, the protagonist and his neighbor, Newton Kumaraswamy. Harsh and Newton never seem to meet each other but each of their places is strongly interconnected to set the narrative in flow.

Art shapes our collective memory and the culture of our past. It also helps us inform our own experiences of important events in our time. The answers to these questions are revealed as we unravel the major character's journey involved in the novel. Many artists keep using art as a tool to tell us stories about their personal and cultural memory giving way to interpretation. Moreover, art does not see the past as a fixed narrative. Instead, art is viewed as having diverse voices from various points of interpretation letting us view things more than once to know about our culture and also helps us shape our history and how we might best document things that are yet to come. This transient nature of art is strongly connected with memory and seen to reside in this process.

Art is viewed as a place of refuge for Harsh Sinha and Newton Kumaraswamy to hold onto their true identities that also revolve around their cultural interests. For Harsh, art helps him identify his sexuality and also to explore the art market that puzzled him. For Newton, a contemporary whimsical artist, art helps to identify himself with his past memories in the present. He gets dreams about his lost beautiful Madras which he tries to paint but fails often. Art also heals him in ways recreating his past helping him to feel one with his art. Through the course of the novel, he undergoes a major transformation and finds his individual self through his art.

The author introduces Newton as a person who hates the hot humid weather and the urban debris surrounding his village. He tries to be one with the nature but he believes that he is in the wrong place. It is noted that he keeps dreaming of another life and seen to live two lives, the one that he lives in this world and the other one which unfolds in his dreams. He is able to paint beautiful Madras in his dreams. He dreams of an ancient Madraspatnam that was a fishing village when Francis Day, his mother's ancestor started a settlement. In this dream, he sees himself sitting at an easel and painting the land with a sense of history trying to record the landscape seen by his ancestors before St George, a trading port. He yearns to paint the same way. But in reality, he is only able to paint anatomies of male and female.

This article examines that past and present co exists to us in the concept of the memory processes as we explore it in terms of paintings relating to queer identity of the protagonist and spatial memory of Newton. The creation of art is used as a methodological framework here to place the study of cultural memory within the paradigm of memory recreation. Focusing on the reflective aspect of art and memory, this research helps to understand that cultural memory as practices of remembrance and also dealing with the past in the present that is embodied and mediated through art.

In his book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman introduces a self-presentation theory which suggests about an individual's part of impression in the participant's observation. In the novel, *Artist, Undone*, this self- presentation theory can be studied through the painting that Harsh buys in an online Auction of Contemporary Art. The painting's uncanny resemblance to Harsh evokes a midlife crisis, beguiling him to question his career path, his relationship with his family, and most importantly his own sexuality. His curiosity with the art world becomes intertwined with a journey of self-discovery which challenges his hetero-normative assumptions. His initial attraction to the painting is fueled by a sense of unspoken desire mirrored in the artwork. The character of Newton also paints landscapes representing the cultural history of his birth place and his childhood memories with his now lost mother. At the end of the novel, he makes a major transformational shift from erotic to spare landscapes revealing out his natural instinct for a cultural background that he yearns for. This concept further goes onto align with 'sites of memory' (Pierre Nora) where art serves as a contested space for shaping and transforming the collective memory. The below lines are from Harsh when he finally tries to come out and address his true identity, "I am gay", I announced without a preamble. I waited for him to react." (Kumar 217)

Roongta was shocked to hear this from his boss, whom he thought would share everything to him. Harsh who was now in a state of his true revelation went on to explain his desire as: "I have a partner – a man. You heard it from me. Now hear this. I like women too." (Kumar, d218).

The author with no explicit sexual encounters tries to bring out the undercurrent of desire and also the character's navigation of societal expectations. It takes a long time for them to identify their true desires and the character of Harsh Sinha is one such example that has been presented in this paper. His journey is a potent exploration of the intersection between sexuality, contemporary art, and the search for identity within the social fabric of modern India.

VI. CONCLUSION:

Painting as an expressive and reformatory art underscores the importance of art for such identity realization. This paper examines the contemporary art that symbolizes collective and vehemently emotive visions of the past. It also critically addresses notions of visualized communities in the minds of the creator. Moreover, paintings are not just passive records but subjective interpretations of the past by the artist. The choice of style, composition and symbolism used by the creator shapes how memories are represented.

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