

**‘THE EARTH’ AND ‘THE WORLD’ IN BIRA KISHORE
PARHI’S AUTOBIOGRAPHY ‘DIRT DUST BROKEN RICE’: A
HEIDEGGERIAN PERSPECTIVE**

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Abstract

This paper explores how commonplace objects and matter undergo alchemy with the touch of art in Bira Kishore Parhi’s Odia autobiography *Dirt Dust Broken Rice (Mali Dhuli Malukha)*. When these objects, commonplace as they are, are changed into works of art, they come to occupy a dimension which is uncommon in the commonplace. Instead of remaining isolated contingent objects, they become situated and evolved in the history of an experience. This experience shows itself in the object not as a thing but as a phenomenon. Such is the revelatory power of art as articulated by Heidegger in his essay “The Origin of the Work of Art”, which takes Van Gogh’s painting “A Pair of Peasant shoes” as its ostensible object. In this paper I have made an attempt to study certain objects such as the chalk (*Khadi*) of his grandfather, the fabric worn by the freedom fighters (*Khadava*), the tatters of a dead child, the half-burnt wood on the cremation ground in Bira Kishore Parhi’s narrative which evolve from the commonplace to the significant through the transfiguring chemistry of his art.

Key words: Heidegger, althea, art, nature, objects, truth, death, memory, semiotics

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1 Introduction

As Heidegger states in his essay “The Origin of the Work of Art”, “The artwork lets us know what the shoes, in truth, are.” (15) The truth of an object is revealed through art. There is another horizon of meanings beyond the utility of an object. Here truth is not a mimetic reproduction or a representational correspondence between fact and statement. Truth in art is what breaks down the materiality of the object into its reality, it is an uncovering, a release into the light of a different significance, an affirmation of essence in its appearance. The essence-*contra*-existence paradigm breaks down because in existence alone the essence is manifested. In art that dualism collapses. The self-closing or the self-sheltering nature of the earth finds its manifestation through the appearance of the world. The cause is disclosed through the effect. The immanent becomes manifest. An artwork reveals the truth that the earth hides. When the nature of nature is concealment, it is the nature of art to reveal. Art compensates its lack, which is its usability aspect, by making itself a site where meaning is harvested.

It is pertinent here to highlight the need for taking Heidegger’s concepts developed in “The Origin of the Work of Art”. Heidegger’s concepts of self-revealing and self-concealing nature of the world and the earth respectively and *aletheia* in art suit best to the nature of research that I undertake here. In Parhi’s autobiography I found the narration of certain objects which do not demand much attention in the daily flow of life. Beyond the narrative boundaries they are just objects with quotidian importance. But in his narrative, I observed, these objects occupy a very strong dimension. They hit a reader hard by means of what they really signify beyond their mere thingly character. In his narrative these ordinary objects evoke meanings and truth which are ordinarily overlooked. They get charged and disturb the reader with their evocative and semiotic power. Like Heidegger found in Van Gogh’s painting “A Pair of Peasant Shoes” the world of the peasants, Parhi found in Khadi, Khadada, Burnt wood and fabrics of a dead child the world of his grant father, the world of the freedom fighters suppressing the personal priorities for the freedom of the nation and the world of the dead and the meaning of life and death. When I was looking for a framework to give critical clothing to my research, I found Heidegger’s essay “The Origin of the Work of Art” befitting enough to pursue this critical endeavour. Art discloses the being of a thing. Heidegger found in art the ability of disclosure. It discloses the essence. Therefore, art achieves its *aletheia*. I found the same unconcealment of being in Parhi’s narrative. In his narrative the commonplace insignificant objects and events occupy affective power. In history (the world or the world of art) meaning is deduced or derived but in nature (the earth) things are as they are. Nature does not show but history does. Art bears the power of unconcealment. It is precisely the function of the world in Heideggerian scheme of things. The earth on the contrary with its quintessential silence consumes everything to the state of elements. Art therefore rescues by revealing. The being of an object is revealed through art.

2 Heidegger’s poetics in “The Origin of the Work of Art”

Heidegger’s treatises on art are primarily “The Origin of the Work of Art” (1935), “The Will to Power as Art” (1936-37) and his meditations on Holderlin, Rilke, George and Trakl (1936-59). In this essay the focus is directed exclusively on “The Origin of the Work of Art”. In Heidegger, works are ‘as naturally present as things’. (2) Essence is not elsewhere. It is located. It is embedded in existence. A thing’s being is permeated in the thing. He gives the examples of Beethoven’s quartets in the publisher’s showroom which are like potatoes in a cellar and Holderlin’s hymns in the soldier’s knapsack along with cleaning equipment. Therefore, every work is not deprived of its thingly character. It is an object. It is an object

that suggests. To be more precise, it is a transformed object. That transformation is the alchemy of art. Therefore, the thingliness is not absent from the aesthetic experience that the artwork promises. Architecture is impossible without stone so is wood carving without wood, painting without colour, music without sound. But there is something else that determines the artwork. Though thingliness is the foundation of any artwork, there is something surplus which transcends the objecthood of the object and sanctions meaning. That something else, Heidegger defines, is artwork's 'artistic nature'. Therefore, the mere thing receives new meaning. It evolves from the predictable to the semiotic. It becomes an allegory to imply something other than it actually is. In Heidegger's words it becomes 'a symbol'. It surpasses its object-centric specificities. Moreover, artwork as a thing is a 'formed matter' bearing the characteristics of colour, sound and hardness which Heidegger calls 'the materiality of things'. Heidegger states, "Matter is the substructure and the field for artistic formation." (8-9) It is the field where art happens as it is in Van Gogh's "A Pair of Peasant shoes". K Harris writes in his book *Art Matters: A Critical Commentary on Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art"* while discussing the distinction between the earth and the world, "What Heidegger means by "earth", I suggested, has something to do with what one might call the material of the art object, although "material" must be thought so broadly here that it includes the rock that bears it, the sky above, the pre-given landscape setting. In presenting the earth, the artist reveals whatever material he is working with in its materiality." (115-116)

Van Gogh's painting "A Pair of Peasant shoes" does not reveal the equipmental being of the ordinary peasant shoes. It does not express its utility value. It does not speak about its function. The value of a piece of equipment depends on its function and usability. But this painting of Van Gogh says something else. It is beyond the utilitarian aspect of the equipment: "From out of the dark opening of the well-worn insides of the shoes the toil of the worker's tread stares forth. In the crudely solid heaviness of the shoes accumulates the tenacity of the slow trudge through the far-stretching and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind. On the leather lies the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles slides the loneliness of the fielded-path as evening falls. The shoes vibrate with the silent call of the earth, its silent gift of the ripening grain, its unexplained self refusal in the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by the uncomplaining worry as to the certainty of bread, wordless joy at having once more withstood want, trembling before the impending birth, and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. This equipment belongs to the *earth* and finds protection in the *world* of the peasant woman." (14) This is what Heidegger sees in that painting. His perception becomes poetry. The painting exudes a kind of feeling which the object in reality could never have. He sees in the painting a different order of reality which is absent in the equipmental manifestation of the shoes. He sees in the empty dark interior the toil of the worker's tread. The worn-out pair of shoes reveals the bone-crushing day-long labour. The painting unravels the atmosphere that is absent in it. The unexpressed is inferred. What is not is evoked. What is absent is disclosed. The painting in the absence of an atmosphere suggests an atmosphere. This is what is the revelatory energy of art. The given is just an indication towards the unsaid. It is a hint to the undisclosed horizon. The truth of thing is uncovered by the art. Therefore, art reveals. The touch of art makes the apparently commonplace object overflow with meanings. That painting becomes an *aporia*. It turns out to be a text which unleashes meanings. The earth is disclosed. Heidegger finally reaches the source from which the object appears and the source with which the object is related to. Here Heidegger establishes a distinction between the *earth* and the *world*. The pair of shoes belongs to the earth. The earth determines its function and existence. It is for the earth. The world of the peasant woman protects it and uses it. The concealed reality immanent in the object is made manifest in art. Art unveils the self-closing and self-concealing phenomena of

the earth. Therefore, art is not *always* mimetic. It is epiphany. It reveals what an object conceals. Art is historical. In history alone truth come to presence. Its historicity is the scope where truth makes its presencing. Kockelmans in his *Heidegger on Art and Artworks* explains, “Art is inherently historical. And as historical it is the artistic production and preservation of the truth in the work. ... art is essentially origin, and a characteristic way in which the truth comes-to-presence, and abides, and thus becomes historical” (192-193)

In Heidegger’s proposition the reality of the shoes is revealed through the artwork, “The artwork lets us know what the shoes, in truth, are.”(15) Art discloses the being of a thing. Moreover, truth happens in Van Gogh’s painting. It achieves its *aletheia*. The unconcealment happens. The painting does not show the pair of peasant shoes as they are. It unconceals the being of that object. It demonstrates something outside the representational accuracy of an object. The painting in fact illuminates the essence of the object. In Heidegger’s opinion artwork is an effort towards the revelation of the unknown interiority unrepresented in any other forms of representation. The weather beaten shoes which Van Gogh chooses reveal the ability of art that opens up the fields of meaning unknown before.

3 ‘The Earth’ and ‘The World’

In Van Gogh the unpleasant, by contrast, is art’s preserve and the field where truth manifests. There is no fixity in art. Art transforms. It makes the common uncommon. Art does not necessarily produce likenesses. In art truth unfolds, “The artwork opens up, in its own way, the being of beings. The opening up, i.e., unconcealing, i.e., the truth of beings, happens in the work. In the artwork, the truth of beings has set itself to the work Art is setting-itself-to-work of truth.” (19) In art meaning matters not what it represents. What it represents is the ground on which meaning manifests. Art is meaning embodied. In art matter is used and in the process it is used up. Matter becomes art. Art prevails over the matter but needs matter. It is not lost. It is existent in the effect as gold in a golden ring. Art by *setting up* a world - the visible and the apparent - *sets forth* the earth, the inward and the withdrawing force. Art makes the latent manifest. The ‘self-secluding’ earth comes open owing to art. The earth is the ground on which stands the world. And it is only in the world the earth appears. Heidegger explains the characteristics of the world and the earth, “The world is the self-opening openness of the broad paths of simple and essential decisions in the destiny of a historical people. The earth is the unforced coming forth of the continually self-closing, and in that way, self-sheltering.” (26) The world, as is apparent, pertains to the historical and the earth to the natural. The ahistorical expresses itself in the historical. They are, for Heidegger, different but not separate. They are not opposites but interdependent.

4 Art and unconcealment

Art *brings forth* the truth of a thing out of concealment. Therefore, the telos of art is not reproduction but unconcealment. It is the openness of world that makes the rise of earth possible. The perpetually self-enclosing earth rises up through the opening of the earth. This rising up of earth happens in the work. What rises up from concealment is called truth. In Heidegger’s assumption this rising up happens in the work. The work is here the work of art. Therefore, art does not produce replica. It is that creative space where truth rises up, “... in the work-being of the work the happening of truth, the disclosure of being, is at work.” (43) The essence of art in Heidegger’s perception is ‘truth’s setting-itself-into-work’. (44) He adds to this by stating art is essentially poetry. But here Heidegger’s poetry is not that of Plato’s. For him art is that poetry which is not ‘aimless imagining of whimsicalities’. For Heidegger art is beyond the negative paradigm of Plato. Timothy Clark while summarizing the importance of the earth and the world in Heidegger’s “The Origin of the Work of Art” comments in his

book *Martin Heidegger: Routledge Critical Thinkers*, “The work’s truth is always offset (like light and shade) by the depth and resistance of what Heidegger calls its ‘earth’ quality, as opposed to the way it projects a ‘world’.” (59)

5 Parhi’s *Dirt Dust Broken Rice*

Coming to Bira Kishore Parhi’s autobiography, the chalk (*Khadi*) to which his grandfather was so obstinately attached to now belongs to the writer. It is now in the writer’s possession. It is not just a piece of usable matter. It is memory. His grandfather survives through this small object. The absent presences. The very sight of the chalk evokes a range of possible images – the grandfather’s calculations, the details of domestic transactions, family expenditure, and the nitty-gritty of production and expenses of the annual harvest of the field. In Parhi’s narrative that commonplace equipment ‘Khadi’ receives meaning that is beyond the equipmental value of the equipment. It exists in the world but reveals the earth. The chalk brings to the readers’ knowledge a range of activities the object is associated with. In his narrative the chalk is not a mere object. It evolves into art – from ordinary to suggestive. It shows what it *really* is. As equipment it clings to its specific usability. It functions as it is made to. But in Parhi’s narrative it turns out to be something different revealing the unexpected range of its associations. The familiar appears different. The nondescript becomes attractive. The literal becomes literary. The insignificant signifies. And the object becomes art. That is the power of his narrative.

The tatters of a dead child on the empty river bank are not mere pieces of cloth. In his narrative they speak. They reveal the reality of existence. They are not just strange shapeless fabrics – the belongings of the dead. The earth consumes them slowly in order to destroy their existence. It is art that protects them from the all-consuming mouth of the earth. It is the earth that makes the existent non-existent. The earth consumes them and makes them disappear. But art on the contrary sanctions them permanence. It revives the vanishing. In the world of Parhi’s narrative they assume different significance. They no longer remain just the consumable matter. They receive an aura of meaning. It is art that rescues things from the oblivion that the earth silently guarantees. The baby mat, the baby pillow, the saucepan etc are not insignificant objects with least value. In the common perception they are mere waste without any equipmental value. The apparently inconsequential becomes alive in Parhi’s narrative. Those objects however unsubstantial unconceal the truth of death. The image of death is inferred from the discarded litter. The narrative brings forth the truth of those dumped objects. The scattered belongings of the dead uncover the self-closing anomaly of death. The self-concealing phenomena of death rise up through those abandoned objects. This rising happens in Parhi’s narrative. Therefore, the disclosure of death takes place.

Truth surfaces in the narrative of those deserted objects. Readers do see those forsaken junked objects differently. They transmit a different resonance. They become meaningful. Art makes this alchemy possible. The meaningless brims with meaning. The historical turns artistic. The equipmental being is not necessarily the only being of equipment. There can be something else that is not commonly noticed. It is art that intervenes to make the unnoticed noticed. Therefore, art is not just mechanical reproduction of reality. It can be a site of revelation. It is epiphany. However, art is incontestably mimetic but not clinically so. There is something in art that surpasses its mimetic monotony. In Heidegger the earth that is concealed, the meaning that is hidden, and truth that is latent are demonstrated in art. Therefore, art imitates to unmask. Those tatters of the dead on that lonely riverbank are the autographs of death. Objects as they are imply nothing beyond utility and decay. But in art they occupy a different dimension. They speak the truth of existence. Those objects in Parhi

possibly pronounce the futility of existence, absurdity of the thought of permanence, collapse of certainty, crisis of ego, misconception of meaning, bubble of hope, similitude of the successive, semblance of perfection and a sense of the end. Those tatters enclose in them meanings apparently imperceptible. It is not in those physical objects but in the narrative of those objects their beings are unearthed.

Similarly, the half-burnt wood on the cremation ground are not simply insignificant residue of a crematorial event. The half-consumed wood and its burnt patches speak how the dead reduced to ashes. The fire from the wood made a form formless. The gaze of the half-burnt wood is the gaze of death. It reminds of a process as to how a shape becomes shapeless. The certainty of death is silently announced from the carbon end of the dead. In Parhi's narrative those petty objects receive substance. They become transformed objects. They mean beyond what they could have in actual meant. They shed their material character in order to suggest the immaterial importance of the meaning of death. Truth presences in the narrative of those miserable objects. Therefore, the trivial becomes significant. In art the ordinary scraps its ordinariness in order to emerge with new directions and indications. Art unveils the unaccustomed content of the commonplace. As the reality of a pair of peasant shoes is revealed through Van Gogh's painting of the same, truth of the unimportant objects such as chalk, the tatters of the dead child and the half-burnt wood is disclosed in Parhi's autobiography.

The fabric worn by the freedom fighters in India *Khadara* may be unimportant in terms of its market value. It may be a piece of mere cotton. But its meaning is beyond utility and market price. It is not just a fabric. It is a symbol. It is a symbol of national unity, patriotism, nation building and formation of national identity. Whoever wears it sacrifices their personal interests and pursuits. Parhi endearingly remembers the days of Pre-Independent India when he was a school boy. The national sentiment was so intense that the nationalists inspired the mass to wear *Khadara* as a mark of protest. The very wearing of the same is a form of protest. That was the extent of intensity the *Khadara* could inspire. *Khadara* epitomises the nation's self-definition and a threat to the colonial dispensation. It promises liberation not without the lurking fear of consequent colonial punitive procedure. The narration of *Khadara* makes the collective memory alive. It reminds of the history that has made our present possible. It is not just a piece of ordinary fabric. It once determined the mood and modality of history. It reveals the struggle and sacrifice of a people who fought against an apparently undefeatable system. It discloses the toil of the nation for its autonomy. Parhi recollects those difficult days when he as a schoolboy offered drinking water to the nationalists as they were not entertained owing to the fear of invoking colonial antagonism. But in his narrative the flavour of his time is evident.

In Parhi the ordinary *khadara* receives a different incarnation. It is a force, a threat and a deadly symbolism potential of dismantling the seemingly irremovable colonial establishment. In Parhi's narrative the past rises up. The narrative inflames the mind of the readers as it renders the truth of the events associated with *Khadara*. That piece of fabric unravels the history of decisive events which made the formation of a nation possible. The common fabric becomes uncommon in Parhi as it bears the crucial history of a nation in it. The truth of that fabric lies in its endeavour towards the national integration. Readers do see the nation in that piece of inelegant fabric. The concealed realities of the cloak become conspicuous in Parhi's world. An object becomes a sign. The predictable becomes connotative. Apart from its connotative competence art preserves too. In Parhi's narrative the truth of those objects is preserved. Art not only brings to the light the truth of objects in nature but also guarantees

their safety against time. Julian Young elaborates on the preserving aspect of art in his book *Heidegger's Philosophy of Art*, "Its (artwork) importance does not, however, lie merely in the creation or recreation of a people. It is important, too, because it *preserves* what it has created" (57)

6 Conclusion

The Heideggerian perspective, primarily his distinction of *the earth* and *the world* in his essay "The Origin of Work of Art", is applied in Bira Kishore Parhi's autobiography *Dirt Dust Broken Rice*. The commonplace objects in Parhi's narrative receive new aspect and importance as in Heidegger's perception of Van Gogh's painting "A Pair of Peasant Shoes". As Van Gogh makes a pair of worn-out peasant shoes an image of extraordinary importance or a signifier whose signifying gravity reaches the origin so do Parhi's *Khadi*, *Khadara*, the tatters and the half-burnt wood. Art unveils the immanent possibilities of objects. By doing so, art explores the secrets of its ontology. The hidden dimensions of objects are unearthed by a historical phenomenon named art.

This paper has tried to indicate how a literary text is a semiotic field where everything is a sign. Every signifier has the potentiality to convey meanings unexpected and unobserved in a commonplace perception. The narration of ordinary objects or phenomena which are commonly overlooked sometimes embodies the being of the text. The paradigm of utilitarianism foregrounds utility or use-value to determine the importance or meaning of an object. This paper contradicts such a paradigm. Every object however significant or insignificant embodies meaning beyond its pre-determined equipmental potentiality. Following Heidegger, this paper tries to propose a thesis that history and nature, or the earth and the world, or matter and art, form a monistic whole. The earth becomes the world. Matter becomes art. It is becoming which is underlined here. It is art that bears the ability of revelation. Art does not have a separate existence. It is a mode of matter.

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