

South Asian Youth Conference 2015

Arts, Culture and Peace

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Introduction

First of all I would like to thank the organisational committee of the South Asian Youth conference inaugurated yesterday in Colombo. It is a great pleasure for me to share some ideas on arts, culture and peace to initiate a fruitful discussion that is needed in the region.

This conference is a timely important event for me as an academic and an arts practitioner. For the last few decades, Sri Lanka's political culture has been able to develop a national sentiment which I would like to call cultural nationalism, in which the majority of the masses were gradually been hypnotised with the nationalistic ideologies to marginalise the other minority communities in the country. This has been a result of the 30 year of civil war and atrocities which took place in the country. As a country where many nationalities are taking part for the formation of the Sri Lankan nationality, atrocities of the war brought hatred and disagreement between communities. Artists who have brought their artistic expression into public spheres on themes related to civil war and reconciliation between communities have been critically judged and also been threatened. Artists and some social workers sacrificed their lives to safeguard the artistic and freedom of expression while others shut their mouths and hibernated in the face of the terror and insecurity.

Now the war has ended and the situation is somewhat different from the past. Yet as artists what we feel today is that we are living in isolated worlds. The questions we need to ask ourselves are in what ways that we could reconnect with the communities which have been intentionally and unintentionally marginalised and subjugated for the last few decades? What measures could we propose to rebuild the trust and the faith between people who

have been practically used to suspect each other? What remedies could we propose as artists to reconnect people who have been isolated along in their own dungeons for decades? In order to achieve these, how arts and culture could be utilised or what role the artists and cultural activists can play to answer such questions?

At this juncture I would like to draw your attention to one of the prominent cultural thinkers in our time, Raymond Williams' ideas on culture and arts. In his widely read book *Culture and Society* Williams traces the historical evolution of some important words that we use in the contemporary world. In the introduction to the *Culture Society*, , Williams argues how these key words such as **Industry, democracy, class, art** and **culture** have been transformed through the social history and changed their utilitarian meanings according to the social changes and transformations occurred. The meaning of 'manufacturing and 'productive institutions' came into play during social changes occurred in the era of industrial revolution. Similarly if you take the word **art**, it's meaning in the early 17th or 18th century is different from our current usage of it. In the early time, the meaning of the term art was completely different from what we now think of art. As William argues 'An art had formerly been any human skill; but Art, now, is signified as a particular group of skills, the 'imaginative' or 'creative' arts Williams 1960, p. Xiii). In the early time, people used the word **artist** to denote 'a skilled person'. But today the meaning of the artist is confined to a person who has a certain type of skill and expertise. If we listen to William further we can understand how these terms and concepts have been interpreted in different socio-cultural context:

"A new name, *aesthetics*, was found to describe the judgement of art, and this, in its turn, produced a name for a special kind of person *aesthete*. The arts, literature, music, painting, sculpture, theatre were grouped together, in this new phrase, as having something essentially in common which distinguished them from other human skills" (Williams 1960, p.xiv).

In this analysis we could see that the artistic practice is recognised as a special human activity which is distinguished from the other general activities we do in our daily life. In this

sense, artists are a special kind of people who utilise their creative and imaginative minds to produce certain artistic products for the society. As William further argues, the changes of meanings implied in the historical contexts also produce remarkable ideas and thoughts on the nature of arts, aesthetic, artists and arts consumption.

Remarkable evolution can be also traced with the term **culture** as William postulates. In the early ages, the term culture was used to denote the 'tending of natural growth' or 'process of human training'. As William argues, these certain meanings of the term culture has been changed and reinterpreted in relation to the other terms such as democracy and class.

Today, when we utter the word culture, we tend to assume certain set of meanings to it which were not assumed by our predecessors decades ago. As Raymond Williams further asserts, the early use of the term culture was attached to the meaning of 'culture of something' and in the nineteenth century this meaning has been changed into 'culture as such, a thing in itself'. William further traces this genealogy of the word thus:

It came to mean, first, 'a general state or **habit of the mind**', having close relations with the idea of human perfection. Second, it came to mean 'the general state of **intellectual development**, in a society as a whole'. Third, it came to mean 'the **general body of the arts**'. Fourth, later in the century, it came to mean '**a whole way of life**, material, intellectual and spiritual'. It came also, as we know, to be a word which often provoked either hostility (aggression) or embarrassment (Williams 1960, p. Xiv).

Culture as a fossil

Today we are producing different meanings and connotations related to the term arts, culture and peace. For instance the term culture has always been defined and developed through the ideological and political viewpoints of cultural institutions and governments. When certain political authorities operate in different institutional and departments, they produce and impose various cultural ideological assumptions on cultural practices and value systems for the masses. For instance, the department of cultural affairs in Sri Lanka for the

last few decades assumed that culture is something that we inherited from our ancestors and history. Governments generally assume that culture is something they need to cherish and celebrate. Cultural agents assume that culture is similar to extinction of animals like dinosaurs. Cultural concepts developed by institutions and organisations in the political level believe that culture is something we have inherited from the past like a fossilized creature and it is needed to preserve it, cherish it and possibly multiply or clone it for the next generation. But my question is what culture or whose culture or heritage is identified as the dominant expression of culture to be preserved or cloned? Thus the ideological underpinning of such projects is always governed by the fact that cultural nationalism and cultural dominance is beginning to create gaps between communities. In this process the 'cultural Other' is created and being marginalized against the dominant culture. This cultural "Other" therefore always appears as a threat to the cultural nationalism and creates friction between co-existence with other cultural practices and norms.

Arts as a cultural construction

Nature of the arts is that it always tries to express, interpret or explore the nature of the self. Moreover, it further proposes us to rethink about the ways that the other is defined in relation to the selfhood. In this sense the artist and her practice is a way of exploring the meanings of the selfhood and its interrelatedness to the other human beings. These interventions in the field of arts create multitudes of arts practices ranging from paintings to the self mutation of bodies in post modern performance practices.

When these three words, Arts – culture – peace utter, one would presumably assume that there are very much easier connections to these spheres of human activities. These words seem to be very much interrelated and appeared to be easily joined in order to make a possible connotation between these three domains. However, in my point of view, the practice of arts, its implications in creative cultural products and consumption of products and final reconciliation between people is not a very much linear process. Further these constructions also emphasize a fake ideological construction where all the human beings are united through arts and culture at the end of the tunnel. We need to rethink about how and

in what ways arts, culture and democracy can coexist in this century where all the boundaries of arts, culture, and democratic practices are merged and blurred in the globalised world.

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