

Material Gods

By Hussein Mitha

God-images and artworks alike can be the results of material converted through creative labour into something embodied, or auratic, something almost autonomous and expressive. Within Indian cultures, gods - for example stone gods - subsist in the material that represents them: the concept of *mūrti*, meaning embodiment, gives statues life. Stone gods are not symbols, but manifestations. A god-image is a mnemonic tool, a material interface, carrying the connotation of a communion with the material world, and also an affirmation of the quasi-divine animative potential involved in the act of making things. Labour, the metabolism between nature and humanity, is given a human face.

Gods, in this sense, are not remote, abstract entities, but concrete configurations of sensuous matter, ways of mediating the familiar mimetic patterning that arises in life: *a particular facial expression; a toy model; a weird lingering clump of human-made or chance semblances that stay with us and later repeat in sketches, dreams, artworks; configurations in clouds; a photograph of a celebrity, a familiar looking relative, or of an ancestor*. Children spontaneously animate random material into semblances. Even cats will do this, imagining a toy to be a real mouse for the purpose of its play, only for the object to become dormant and inanimate once again when the cat has lost interest in it. Supposedly non-living objects are in fact just paused, waiting to receive animation. The world of everyday gods flickers in and out, throughout material culture, in stop-start rhythm. In the psychoanalysis of Melanie Klein, for example, the distinction between parts of the inanimate world and conscious beings is eroded. In her *Object Relations Theory* focussing on child psychoanalysis, the 'object' actually first refers to a person, typically the mother (who is not the innate destination of the drive for the child, but the chance embodiment of a particular feeling or emotion). Other objects - inanimate material things, such as a toy, a comfort blanket etc. - are used by the child to replace the primary object, the mother, and to mediate the various ambivalent emotions linked to drives. Reading this psychoanalytical torsion backwards through an anthropological lens we might argue that humans create gods out of inanimate objects not necessarily to worship a remote consciousness through them, but to indicate to ourselves that we are also only objects to another forming subjectivity, and therefore these anthropomorphised things have a strange kinship with us. Consciousness is connected to material. Whereas the psychoanalytical framework of Klein forecloses the subjectivity of the mother in turning her into an object, the act of making model gods goes a step further in demonstrating that the object may itself be a conscious being. In ancient Indian cultures god-images are treated with the same familiarity as if they were in a sense no more and no less than real people, such as a relative, for example. As Walter

Benjamin put it: "To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return."

An example of a secular god in the western cultural imagination might be Kafka's Odradek, a creature that lives in the house, a chance configuration of material threads which has built up over time so that its resemblances preserve a deep pattern within the family home. Odradek is made of something that is also nothing: spools, threads, a wooden star. It is an autonomous creature whose subjectivity seems formed by the various disparate materials which it is made of. In one sense, Odradek represents the commodity under capitalism alienated from the worker, the alienation of the worker from their work, a manifestation of the dead labour preserved by commodities under capitalism, come apart and back together to plague the bourgeois household as a reminder of the history of exploitation and class domination concealed within its formation. Odradek with its sculptural constellation of disparate materials resembles a kind of sculptural installation familiar to the world contemporary art, and is described in a similar language: "a flat, star-shaped reel of thread" from which "a little rod emerges" etc. Or a conceptual dramaturgical language: "the whole thing is able to stand upright as on two feet."

Another kind of connective material subjectivity is explored through contemporary art as in the concept of 'mystical assemblages' of the artist Betye Saar, whose practice involves found objects, collage and juxtaposition of materials which the artist alchemicalises and reconfigures deeply oppressive and personal matter as an African American woman in a mystical process linked to ritual. Saar often uses god-images to arrest certain constellations in order to undermine their harmful meanings and highlight the historical struggle. Disparate material - racist ephemera, capitalist refuse, including racist 'aunty Jemima' toys and Buddha-statuettes - are reconfigured and reclaimed into a new emancipatory visual language.

Under capitalism, material culture becomes relegated and abstracted to the law of exchange value. The process of colonial looting, by which institutions such as The British Museum owe their existence, sees many god-images becoming highly prized artefacts. The original immediate function of these gods is linked to a less daily or practical purpose; instead the enigma surrounding these gods becomes aligned with the transcendentalism of art, the idea of reaching some remote arcane power. This says more about capitalism and western contemporary art than it does the ancient cultures it appropriates. Western orientalism turns 'native' objects into both art-objects and commodities. Charles Baudelaire, the originary figure of western modernism, dramatises this relation:

"I never pass by a wooden fetish, a gilded Buddha, a Mexican idol without reflecting: perhaps it is the true God."

This Baudelairean paradigm reveals something like a mystical use-value hidden within the material world of exchange-value: the gods are set adrift on the world market.