UNIT 3 AESTHETICS: DEFINITION, NATURE AND SCOPE

Contents

3.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this Unit is to introduce the concept 'Aesthetics' and explain certain concepts relating to it in terms of its nature. By doing so, we expect to understand the scope of aesthetics. Very basically, aesthetics involves two issues: (1) definitions of art and (2) responses to art. For example, when we consider why a particular painting was created, purchased, displayed, and liked, we are considering a set of aesthetic designations and the nature of aesthetic responses. Further, this chapter proposes to show the general connection between aesthetic recipient and aesthetic experience on the basis of their inseparable bonding, which begins with the very act of approaching art in general.

Thus by the end of this Unit you should be able:

- to have a basic understanding of the concept called Aesthetics;
- to comprehend the nature of Aesthetics;
- to identify the three approaches of Aesthetics;
- to be able to understand aesthetic recipient and aesthetic experience
- to understand the scope of Aesthetics

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The term 'aesthetics' is essentially derived from the Greek word *aisthetikos*, meaning "esthetic, sensitive, sentient", which in turn was derived from *aisthanomai*, meaning "I perceive, feel, sense". The modern usage of the term "aesthetics" was appropriated and coined with new meaning in the German form *Æsthetik* (modern spelling *Ästhetik*) by a German philosopher called Alexander Baumgarten in 1735.

Philosophers did not start to use the word 'aesthetics' until eighteenth century. Later it began to emerge as a term describing the whole area of feeling, as opposed to reason. A disagreement on the relation between emotion and reason is one of the oldest problems in philosophy. Aesthetics arose as an attempt to offer a constructive account of the role played by emotions and feelings in the human life. When the fine arts were advanced to an important place in culture, a particular kind of feeling was especially associated with art, so that gradually we have come to use 'aesthetic' as a generic term not only for certain special feeling but all our relations to art as well. In that sense aesthetics is not restricted to post-eighteenth century philosophy. Philosophers use the term 'aesthetics' to refer to a discipline of reasoned discourse like ethics or epistemology. The subject matter of aesthetics may be an intuition, feeling or emotion, but aesthetics itself is part of philosophy and is open to the same demands for evidence and logically controlled argumentation that characterize all philosophy. In that sense aesthetics should be able to account for all the phenomena of its field, though there may be many different theories that compete with the discipline.

3.2 DEFINITION OF AESTHETICS

Aesthetics (also spelled esthetics) is broadly defined as the philosophical study of the nature of art, beauty and taste. To define its subject matter more precisely is, however, immensely difficult. Indeed, it could be said that self-definition has been the major task of aesthetics over the decades. Here, we are acquainted with an interesting and puzzling realm of experience: the realm of the beautiful, the ugly, the sublime, and the elegant; of taste, criticism, and fine art; and of contemplation and sensuous enjoyment. It is our assumption that similar principles are operative and similar interests are engaged in all these phenomena. If we are mistaken in this impression, we will have to dismiss such ideas as beauty and taste as having only peripheral philosophical interest. Alternatively, if our impression is correct and philosophy corroborates it, we will have discovered the foundation for an influential philosophical aesthetics.

When we speak of an aesthetic theory in philosophy, we are trying to give explanatory account of fine arts and beauty. A theory for example, claims that all form of art is an imitation or mimesis. Plato was the first to use the word 'imitation' in relation with poetry in his *The Republic*, and considered art as mere imitation of real life and of no serious use or quality. Later Aristotle defended imaginative art as something that helps human beings to get away from unnecessary emotions, offers useful purgation of *Katharsis*. Today, the theory of *Katharsis* is considered as one of the greatest contributions to aesthetics.

3.3 NATURE OF AESTHETICS

It is one of the most difficult tasks answering the question 'what is aesthetics'? Aesthetics is that philosophical country whose borders of investigation are known as experiences of beauty and appreciation of art. This territory of beauty and art has been visited numerous times by brave explorers, the aestheticians, who have given accounts more or less detailed, but always enthusiastic, of their discoveries. The charges against the aestheticians mainly are twofold: (1) that they attempt the impossible, in that beauty and art are indefinable (2) that they attempt the

futile, in that, even were a definition possible, it would be of no aid to the appreciation of an art work. So an examination and reply to these two charges will reveal to us the nature and objectives of aesthetics as a field of study and investigation. Aesthetics must definitely, be based on observations about art, about the ideas and feelings that art produces and about the specific interpretations that art communicates. Thus aesthetics depends on facts from art history, on observations about perception and how we know through our senses, and on reflections on the language that we use to talk about both art and our responses to it. Yet aesthetics is not same thing as art history or criticism. Aesthetics reaches beyond art to nature and perhaps to the nuances a larger picture of sensory awareness.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) Define aesthetics.

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2) What problem do you encounter while trying to understand the nature of aesthetics?

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3.4 THREE APPROCHES TO AESTHETICS

The central theoretical term of the first approach is 'beauty'. Edmund Burke in his famous treatise *On the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) attempted to draw a distinction between two aesthetic concepts. His distinction between the sublime and the beautiful was extremely influential, reflecting as it did the prevailing style of contemporary criticism. By studying the qualities that these concepts denoted, Burke analyzed the different outlooks that are directed toward them. Burke is important because he explained the opposition of beauty and sublimity by a physiological theory. He made the opposition of pleasure and pain the source of the two aesthetic categories, deriving beauty from pleasure and sublimity from pain. According to Burke, the pleasure of beauty has a relaxing effect on the character of the body, whereas sublimity, in contrast, tightens these characters. Thus, by applying the ability of his imaginative theory, he could distinguish the beautiful and sublime: "The ideas of the sublime and the beautiful stand on foundations so different, that it is hard, I had almost said impossible, to think of reconciling them in the same subject, without considerably lessening the effect of the one or the other upon the passions'' [113-114]. Burke's use of this

physiological theory of beauty and sublimity makes him the first English writer to offer a purely aesthetic explanation of these effects; that is, Burke was the first to explain beauty and sublimity purely in terms of the process of perception and its effect upon the perceiver.

The second approach is related to a philosophical study of certain states of mind; responses, attitudes, emotions that are held to be involved in aesthetic experience. In the seminal work of modern aesthetics The *Critique of Judgment* (1790) Immanuel Kant located certain salient features of the aesthetic in the faculty of "judgment," whereby we take certain position toward objects, separating them from our scientific interests and our practical concerns. The key to the aesthetic realm according to Kant lies in a certain "disinterested" attitude, which we may presume toward any object and can be articulated in contrasting ways. The *Critique of Judgment* begins with an account of beauty. The initial issue is: what kind of judgment is it that results in our saying, for example, 'That is a beautiful sunset'. Kant argues that such aesthetic judgments or 'judgments of taste' must have four key distinguishing features. First, they are 'disinterested, which means, we take pleasure in something because we judge it beautiful, rather than judging it beautiful. Second and third, such judgments are both 'universal' and 'necessary'. This means roughly that it is an intrinsic part of the activity of such a judgment to expect others to agree with us. We debate and argue about our aesthetic judgments – and especially about works of art -and we tend to believe that such debates and arguments can actually achieve something. Indeed, for many purposes, 'beauty' behaves as if it were a real property of an object, like its weight or chemical composition. But Kant insists that universality and necessity are in fact a product of features of the human mind (Kant calls these features 'common sense'), and that there is no objective property of a thing that makes it beautiful. Fourth, through aesthetic judgments, beautiful objects appear to be 'purposive without purpose' (sometimes translated as 'final without end'). An object's purpose is the concept according to which it was made (the concept of a vegetable soup in the mind of the cook, for example); an object is purposive if it appears to have such a purpose; if, in other words, it appears to have been made or designed. But it is part of the experience of beautiful objects, Kant argues, that they should affect us as if they had a purpose, although no particular purpose can be found.

The third approach is based on the philosophical study of the aesthetic object. An aesthetic object is an object or an event which focuses on the aesthetic interest or an aesthetic experience. We might say further that aesthetic objects are objects like paintings, symphonies, plays, flowers, sunsets and so forth. In principle an aesthetic object can be any sensible object in the world. This is because any sensible object in the world can be approached to or experienced aesthetically. This approach reflects the view that the problems of aesthetics exist primarily because the world contains a special class of objects toward which we react selectively and which we describe in aesthetic terms.

The existence of such objects forms the major phenomenon and our aesthetic experience should thus be described according to such concepts and the meaning of aesthetics should be determined accordingly. The normal group considered as prime aesthetic objects are mainly works of art. All other aesthetic objects (landscapes, faces etc) tend to be included in this class only because, and to the extent that, they can be seen as art. If we adopt such an approach, then there

ceases to be a real distinction between aesthetics and the philosophy of art. Much of recent aesthetics has been similarly focused on artistic problems, and it could be said that it is now orthodox to consider aesthetics entirely through the study of art. The third approach to aesthetics does not require this concentration upon art. Even someone who considered art to be no more than one manifestation of aesthetic value - perhaps even a comparatively insignificant manifestation - may believe that the first concern of aesthetics is to study the objects of aesthetic experience and description and to find in them the true distinguishing features of the aesthetic realm.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) Explain the three basic approaches to aesthetics.

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2) Explain Edmund Burke's distinction between the sublime and the beautiful.

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3) Explain the four certain salient features of the aesthetic in the faculty of "judgment," by Kant.

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3.5 THE AESTHETIC RECIPIENT

Who is at the receiving end? Who's the receiver of aesthetics? Only a certain section of people have aesthetic interests and aesthetic experience. These interests produce and appreciate art, employ concepts such as beauty, expression, and form. But which factors help these people connect themselves with the so-called aesthetic realm? This question is not something new. Even Plato was asked this question. But, coming to modern times, one can see that this question on aesthetics

received its most important elucidation in the philosophy of Kant, who argued that it is only rational beings who can exercise judgment or the faculty of aesthetic interest. Kant also argued that if not exercised in aesthetic judgment one's rationality is incomplete. It is worth pausing to examine these two claims.

Who are the rational beings? The people whose thought and conduct are guided by concrete reason could be called rational beings. They deliberately take decisions about what to believe and what to do; and who affect each other's beliefs and actions through argument and persuasion. But what's reason? According to Kant, reason has both a theoretical and a practical employment. A rational person finds both his/her conduct and thought inspired and limited by reason. Morality, enshrined in the categorical imperative, which enjoins us to act only on that maxim which we can at the same time will as a universal law, is the guiding law of rational conduct. Here practical reason plays its own role. For a rational being, the satisfaction of the demand of reason is more important. He lives responsive to the law of reason. For him, every rational individual is being made by reason and by morality. The rational being, he recognizes, must be treated always as an end in himself, as something of intrinsic value, and never as a mere object to be disposed of according to purposes that are not its own. Reason has its own merits. It makes people capable to see things intrinsically valuable. But it is not exercised only practically or only in our dealings with other reasoning beings. It may also be exercised contemplatively toward nature as a whole. In this case, practical considerations are held in abeyance, and we stand back from nature and look on it with a disinterested concern. Such an attitude is not only peculiar to rational people but also necessary to them. Without it, they have only an impoverished grasp of their own significance and of their relation to the world in which they are situated through their thoughts and actions. This disinterested contemplation and the experiences that arise from it acquaint us, according to Kant, with the ultimate harmony that exists between the world and our faculties. They therefore provide the ultimate guarantee, both of practical reasoning and of the understanding, by intimating to us directly that the world answers to our purposes and corresponds to our beliefs. Disinterested contemplation forms, for Kant, the core of aesthetic experience and the ultimate ground of the judgment of beauty. He thus concludes (1) that only rational beings have aesthetic experience; (2) that every rational being needs aesthetic experience and is significantly incomplete without it; and (3) that aesthetic experience stands in fundamental proximity to moral judgment and is integral to our nature as moral beings.

How important is Kant among modern philosophers? Some followed him, sometimes some ignored him. However they rarely have ventured to show that aesthetic experience is more widely distributed than the human race. Take a cow for an example, that in staring at a landscape it is moved by the sentiment of beauty? What in a cow's behaviour or mental composition could manifest such a feeling? A cow can be uninterested, but it cannot surely be disinterested. But a rational person can be disinterested because for him disinterest is the most passionate form of interest. Only while analyzing such considerations one comes to understand that how deeply in human nature the aesthetic impulse is embedded, and how impossible it is to separate this impulse from the complex mental life. It's this mental life that distinguishes human beings from animals. This condition must be borne in mind by any thinker seeking to confront the all-important question of the relation between the aesthetic and the moral.

3.6 THE AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

In his book, *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known*, Christopher Bollas defines aesthetic experience as a kind of *dejavu*, "an existential recollection of the time when communicating took place primarily through this illusion of deep rapport of subject and object". Can we really tell apart a faculty, an attitude, a mode of judgment, or a form of experience that is distinctively 'aesthetic'? And if so, can we attribute to it the significance that would make this philosophical endeavor both important in itself and relevant to the many questions posed by beauty, criticism, and art?

Western philosophers have always been interested in the nature and appreciation of art, and also more importantly on the psychology of the artists/individuals. Plato argued that aesthetic experience involved the apprehension of the good in nature. Starting with David Hume and Immanuel Kant, modern thinkers tried to explain aesthetic experience in psychological terms. Hume argued that aesthetic experience was associated with sensitivity to the association between a perception and a feeling. The particular aesthetic feelings were those of refined pleasure, delight, awe, admiration, joy and so on- in other words affects and passions considered to be of special, positive value. Hume believed that certain type of experiences, those possessing beauty, attained higher qualities in the formal expression of these feelings. Taking their cue from Kant, many philosophers have defended the idea of an aesthetic attitude as one divorced from practical concerns, a kind of "distancing," or standing back, as it were, from ordinary involvement. The classic statement of this position is Edward Bullough's "'Psychical Distance' as a Factor in Art and an Aesthetic Principle," an essay published in the *British Journal of Psychology* in 1912.

What kind of distance is exactly envisaged? Does distance imply a lack of practical involvement? If such is the case, how can we ever take up an aesthetic attitude to those things that have a purpose for us - things such as a dress, building, or decoration? But if these are not aesthetic, have we not paid a rather high price for our definition of this word - the price of detaching it from the phenomena that it was designed to identify? Kant's own formulation in this regard is considered more satisfactory. He described the recipient of aesthetic experience not as distanced but as 'disinterested', meaning that the recipient does not treat the object of enjoyment either as a vehicle for curiosity or as a means to an end. He contemplates the object as it is in itself and "apart from all interest." In a similar spirit, Arthur Schopenhauer argued that a person could regard anything aesthetically so long as he regarded it in independence of his will - that is, irrespective of any use to which he might put it. Regarding it thus, a person could come to see the idea that the object expressed, and in this knowledge consists aesthetic appreciation (1819; *The World as Will and Idea*).

An instance of such a view is the popular theory of art as a kind of "play" activity, in which creation and appreciation are divorced from the normal urgencies of existence and surrendered to leisure. "With the agreeable, the good, the perfect," wrote Friedrich Schiller, "man is merely in earnest, but with beauty he plays" (1794-95; *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*). Such thoughts have already been encountered. The problem is to give them philosophical precision. They have recurred in modern philosophy in a variety of forms - for example, in the theory that the aesthetic object is always considered for its own sake, or as a

unique individual rather than a member of a class. Those particular formulations have caused some philosophers to consider aesthetic objects as though they were endowed with a peculiar metaphysical status. Alternatively, it is sometimes argued that the aesthetic experience has an intuitive character, as opposed to the conceptual character of scientific thought or the instrumental character of practical understanding.

The simplest way of summarizing this approach to aesthetics is in terms of two fundamental propositions:

1) The aesthetic object is an object of sensory experience and enjoyed as such: it is heard, seen, or (in the limiting case) imagined in sensory form.

2) The aesthetic object is at the same time contemplated: its appearance is a matter of intrinsic interest and studied not merely as an object of sensory pleasure but also as the repository of significance and value.

The first of these propositions explains the word aesthetic, which was initially used in this connection by the Leibnizian philosopher Alexander Baumgarten in *Meditationes Philosophicae de Nonnullis ad Poema Pertinentibus* (1735; *Reflections on Poetry*). Baumgarten borrowed the Greek term for sensory perception (*aisthésis*) in order to denote a realm of concrete knowledge in which content is communicated in sensory form. The second proposition is, in essence, the foundation of taste. It describes the motive of our attempt to discriminate rationally between those objects that are worthy of contemplative attention and those that are not.

Almost all of the aesthetic theories of post-Kantian Idealism depend upon those two propositions and try to explain the peculiarities of aesthetic experience and aesthetic judgment in terms of the synthesis of the sensory and the intellectual that they imply - the synthesis summarized in Hegel's theory of art as "the sensuous embodiment of the Idea." Neither proposition is particularly clear. Throughout the discussions of Kant and his immediate following, the "sensory" is assimilated to the "concrete," the "individual," the "particular," and the "determinate," while the "intellectual" is assimilated to the "abstract," the "universal," the "general," and the "indeterminate" – incorporations that would in modern times be regarded with extreme suspicion. Nevertheless, subsequent theories have repeatedly returned to the idea that aesthetic experience involves a special synthesis of intellectual and sensory components, and that both its peculiarities and its value are to be derived from such a synthesis.

This idea at once gives rise to many paradoxes. The most important was noticed by Kant, who called it the 'antinomy of taste'. As an exercise of reason, he argued, aesthetic experience must inevitably tend toward a reasoned choice and therefore must formulate itself as a judgment. Aesthetic judgment, however, seems to be in conflict with itself. It cannot be at the same time aesthetic (an expression of sensory enjoyment) and also a judgment (claiming universal assent). Yet all rational beings, by virtue of their rationality, seem disposed to make these judgments. On the one hand, they feel pleasure in some object, and this pleasure is immediate, not based, according to Kant, in any conceptualization or in any inquiry into cause, purpose, or constitution. On the other hand, they express their pleasure in the form of a judgment, speaking "as if beauty were a quality of the object," and so representing their pleasure as objectively valid. But how can

this be so? The pleasure is immediate, based in no reasoning or analysis. So what permits this demand for universal agreement?

However we approach the idea of beauty, we find this paradox emerging. Our ideas, feelings, and judgments are called aesthetic precisely because of their direct relation to sensory enjoyment. Hence, no one can judge the beauty of an object that he has never encountered. Scientific judgments, like practical principles, can be received "second hand" or through secondary assessment. It would seem to follow from this that there can be no rules or principles of aesthetic judgment, since the pleasure we get is subjective in the perception of the object and cannot be talked about it by any grounds of proof. It is always experience, and never conceptual thought, that gives the right to aesthetic judgment, so that anything that alters the experience of an object changes its aesthetic significance as well. As Kant explains, aesthetic judgment is "free from concepts," and beauty itself is not a concept. Such a conclusion, however, seems to be inconsistent with the fact that aesthetic judgment is a form of personal 'judgment'. When we describe something as beautiful, we do not mean merely that it pleases: we are speaking about it, not about us, and, if challenged, we try to find reasons to justify this view.

In short, the expression aesthetic judgment seems to be a contradiction in terms, denying in the first term precisely that reference to rational considerations that it affirms in the second. This paradox, which we have expressed in Kant's language, is not peculiar to the philosophy of Kant. On the contrary, it is encountered in one form or another by every philosopher or critic who takes aesthetic experience seriously, and who therefore recognizes the tension between the sensory and the intellectual constraints upon it. On the one hand, aesthetic experience is rooted in the immediate sensory enjoyment of its object through an act of perception. On the other, it seems to reach beyond enjoyment toward a meaning that is addressed to our reasoning powers and that seeks judgment from them. Thus criticism, the reasoned justification of aesthetic judgment, is an unavoidable upshot of aesthetic experience. Yet, critical reasons can never be merely intellectual; they always contain a reference to the way in which an object is perceived. In modern times, Sigmund Freud viewed aesthetic experience as sublimation of forbidden sexual desires, a displacement and transformation of libido that denied direct expression, is allowed discharge in alternative, culturally valued ways. This act results in aesthetic pleasure. The close link between art and regressive processes and fantasies seems to support the sublimation approach. From this view point, symbolism, a fundamental component of most forms of aesthetic expression, is the same process as that occurring in dream work, and thus opens art to psycho-analytic interpretation.

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) Explain the concept 'aesthetic recipient'.

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2) Explain the concept ‘aesthetic experience’.

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3.7 SCOPE OF AESTHETICS

Aesthetics is broader in scope than the philosophy of art, which comprises one of its branches. It deals not only with the nature and value of the arts but also with those responses to natural objects that find expression in the language of the beautiful and the ugly. A problem is encountered at the outset, however, for terms such as beautiful and ugly seem too vague in their application and too subjective in their meaning to divide the world successfully into those things that do, and those that do not, exemplify them. Almost anything might be seen as beautiful by someone or from some point of view; and different people apply the word to quite disparate objects for reasons that often seem to have little or nothing in common. It may be that there is some single underlying belief that motivates all of their judgments. It may also be, however, that the term beautiful has no sense except as the expression of an attitude, which is in turn attached by different people to quite different states of affairs.

Moreover, in spite of the emphasis laid by philosophers on the terms beautiful and ugly, it is far from evident that they are the most important or most useful either in the discussion and criticism of art or in the description of that which appeals to us in nature. To convey what is significant in a poem we might use such terms as ironical, moving, expressive, balanced, and harmonious. Likewise, in describing a favourite stretch of countryside, we may find more use for peaceful, soft, atmospheric, harsh, and evocative, than for beautiful. The least that should be said is that beautiful belongs to a class of terms from which it has been chosen as much for convenience sake as for any sense that it captures what is distinctive of the class. At the same time, there seems to be no clear way of delimiting the class in question - not at least in advance of theory. Aesthetics must therefore cast its net more widely than the study either of beauty or of other aesthetic concepts if it is to discover the principles whereby it is to be defined.

At a very basic level aesthetics involves the knowledgeable appreciation of art, an enquiry toward art for purposes of examination, refinement, and elaboration. To some degree, the study of aesthetics is applicable to all age groups and all levels of readiness simply because aesthetics, despite its seemingly esoteric character when part of formalized philosophical systems, is the study of how humans relate and give meaning to a particular type of phenomenon (art) in their environment.

Check Your Progress IV

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) What is the scope of aesthetics?

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3.8 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have tried to give a basic idea about aesthetics, by giving a definition, which becomes clarified in the process of the course. To investigate on the nature of aesthetics, we closely examined the three major approaches to aesthetics. We have also elaborately considered certain concepts like 'aesthetic recipient and 'aesthetic experience''. Finally we conclude the unit with a short consideration of the scope of aesthetics.

3.9 KEY WORDS

Aesthetic Object **:** An object or an event which focuses on the aesthetic interest or an aesthetic experience.

Aesthetic Judgment **:** Sensory contemplation or appreciation of an object, not necessarily an art object.

Katharsis **:** The experience of useful purgation in art.

Rational Being **:** human being capable of using the capacity for consistent and valid reasoning.

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