

Material Objects, Materiality and Social Lives

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Abstract: *Scholars have long invoked ideas of totemism, fetishism and anthropomorphism as ways of conceptualizing the relation between humans and their material world. All perspectives, I believe, offer modes of 'being' for both the subjects and objects, transcending and shuffling subjectivity with desired objectification as and when socially necessary and culturally permissible. Neither the human subjects nor the material objects remain constant subjects and/or objects across space and time. subjectivity is objectively constituted and reciprocally, objectivity is also subjectively articulated. So, what becomes essential here is the appearance of objects and the meaning they entail, as assigned by the experiencing subject to the objects it manages, engages with and feels through and for them. The experiences arise in an intersubjective negotiation, whereby the material object is transported from its natural to a culturally-defining set up, then again returned to its 'nature' over time. The object travels through a life along with its subject, followed by periodic injunctions of sociability and renewal of its being. This cyclical journey from cultural significance to objectification to acquiring subjective agency and then returning to its naturalness again, the object produces a social life that's no less significant than that of its human associates. This paper shall remain an epistemological exercise for brining into foray these notions and empirically delineating a similar discourse.*

Keywords: Materiality, Objects, Quasi-objects, Transitional roles, Sociability, Toys, Jewellery.

Introduction

This paper is an attempt at understanding the life of an object in its naturalness and its cultural space and significance. Objects

permeates human life through structural metaphors as well as everyday events. People often think of the world through objects, and that objects, like human subjects have agency (Gell 1998). An attempt at narrating biographies of objects can only be done keeping in mind the human embeddedness with objects and object gaining agency through their signifying subjects (i.e. humans). An object can never be the author of its own biography or of another object in the way that humans are able to in producing their life stories. There is no escape from the subject, but after a point material objects too dictate how they are appropriated, re-contextualized and objectified across space and time. However, its intrinsic materiality and human intervention into its course of conduct for production of life, essentially raise the dilemma between its use and exchange value, putting to question the cultural significance of the object in relation to its nature and temporality. Thus, bringing to foray the question of consumption and materiality that nudge us to explore the idea of fetish and man's exchange of his position with the material thing in a reified state of being.

Scholars have long invoked ideas of totemism, fetishism and anthropomorphism as ways of conceptualizing the relation between humans and their world of material objects. All perspectives, I believe, are much more than mere modes of thinking. Rather they tend to offer modes of 'being' for both the subjects and objects, transcending and shuffling subjectivity with desired objectification circumstantially. Neither the human subjects nor the material objects remain constant subjects and/or objects across space, respectively. For instance, it was Marx who made the most compelling summary of how (through labour) we produce objects that become an extension of our subjective selves and gain consciousness of its own, operating externally beyond our will thereafter. Thus, the relationship that arises between the subject and object is one like that between two persons. Anthropomorphism tries to see this as essentially an outcome of our bodily(sensual) and mindful(sensible) relation with things in the world. Sartre (1965) says in this regard, "when knowledge and feeling are oriented toward something real, actually perceived, the thing, like a reflector, returns the light it has received from it. As a result of this continual interaction, meaning is continually

enriched at the same time as the objects soaks up affective qualities.” (Sartre 1996: 55)

However, subjectivity is objectively constituted and reciprocally, objectivity is also subjectively articulated. So, what becomes essential here is the appearance of objects and the meaning they entail, as assigned by the experiencing subject to the objects it manages, engages with and feels through and for them. The experiences arise in an intersubjective negotiation, whereby the material object is transported from its natural to a culturally-defining setting, then again returned to its nature over time. The object travels through a life along with its subject, followed by periodic injunctions of sociability and renewal of its being. This cyclical movement from cultural significance to objectification to acquiring subjective agency and then returning to its naturalness again, the object produces a social life that’s no less significant than that of its human associates. The ideas of fetishism of objects need to be reconsidered and the ontology of things revisited here to understand this world of materiality and material things upon which the essentialist definitions and existentialist concerns of human life stand erect. The need is to locate objects in relation to the social world and network of relationships and try delineate a methodological possibility for doing the same. Keeping these views in mind I would narrate the journey of an object through a flower and its plethora of social value, its objectification as a garland, embodiment of memories in its dried-up state and its replication in a famous painting of Van Gogh, ‘The Sunflower’ (1887). Besides, I shall briefly discuss the cultural history of objects and the ‘transitional roles’ that they assume by recording stories of emotive association with Toys on one hand and Jewellery in another.

The flower, garland and their subjective meanings

The Post Enlightenment upsurge of reason and the demand for a life organized through rational actions had to make nature it’s subservient. The materialist theories and fetishism of commodities led to a conscious disengagement from the realm of objects, which was to be merely exploited for human survival. However, Simmel (1968) argued, objects are closely linked to what people do and the social processes coming to exist thereby. They produce human value and in turn gain significant meaning through re-cognition

of the contextual, cultural, temporal and spatial considerations, posing some challenge to the homogenizing and universalizing notions of modernity. The notions of nature and culture, object and subject are deeply infused in each other, as the material object becomes a significant 'other' because of its cultural manifestations and reproduction. In fact, Culture reinstates itself through its subjective interface with these objects of nature and things of human creation.

The flower in its natural state of temporariness, ethereal presence, beauty and fragrance gets objectified and associated with human emotions such as love, admiration, sacredness, purity, longing and bereavement. These emotions get culturally re[produced] through exchange of flowers and having them fill up our experiences. Experiences and corresponding human emotions are weaved into a garland too, making an object that shall travel through personal biographies and varied social relations emerging therein. The garland when weaved is a mere commodity that has exchange value. And for the seller it is an object that shall be sold for an amount in the marketplace. But soon it makes a journey through relationships and life events signifying its subjective meaning and translates itself into assuming social values such as love, honour, restraint, segregation, sacredness, departures, initiations and many more. In turn, the garland and the flowers gain signifying value as an object, independent of its exchange value after a point. But it does retain enough utility and thereby meaning through subjective appropriation of humans. The flower's life as a signifier of human events of everyday passes through a trove of social understanding embedded in a culturally defined space.

At any given point of time, we humans are actors and are simultaneously acted upon too. The material objects act upon us as much as we act upon them. Beyond the dichotomy of 'we' and 'they' or 'it'; subject and object, there is a mode of 'being', which Levy-Bruhl (1926) calls the 'mystical participation'. Wherein the world of object is experienced as animate, resonating and responding to human spells, imagination and articulated desires. Humans happen to grasp and process their immediate experience through things external to themselves, such as customs, shared geo-physical spaces, vegetation and possibly most material objects they create and come to hold in co-creation. The embodied selves

essentially look for their disembodied reflections through objects outside of themselves. We often see that through varied objects, referring specifically to the flowers here, one transplants their thoughts and feelings of oneself and that of the cognized other into material objects. Reorganizing within themselves and grasping modes of human existences through extra-human objectification. While processing subjective experiences of love, anger, subjugation, discrimination, isolation and thereby social alienation, we absorb the material objects into our lives and livelihoods. This often makes us lose sight of the difference between the materiality of things and idea of personhood or personality that the objects are attaining simultaneously. The flower no longer remains a mere object of admiration and source of gratifying aromatic experience. It assumes value that are identified with social customs, rituals and practices encompassing birth, marriage and death, marking the transitions of human life. They are preserved beyond their material value, as pieces of socio-cultural signifiers and thus an 'objective' window is opened up for letting in experientially rich patterns of human social action through their use and association with flowers.

Objectification and the subjective consumer

One of the most fundamentals for studying biographical objects is 'objectification', as the social world is as much constituted by materiality, as material by the social processes. Objectification considers the construction and translation of social relations, culture and value systems through objects. There are two primary concerns: first, knowledge is constructed through and identities emerge from objects. Secondly, knowledge is articulated and carried over by relations among relations of things, i.e., the object with certain agency. The garland acts as an objectifying structure often by placing itself in relation to other objects (i.e. the flowers, the human body, the photograph, the idol, incense sticks, pots holding them and even the person concerned in all social rituals and celebratory events of human life). A garland in several life events is used as a signifying agent to separate the sacred from the profane. It is used to objectify the body that wears it ritualistically, let it be in marriage or death, therefore signifying the transition from one state of being to the other and also building a distinct agency for the body in its new roles and functions or

absence and avoidance of some. It makes the body and the embodied being display its life course in relation to that of the garland. The flowers and garlands are also used to build relation between other objects. The photograph is deified, the inanimate is given life, and the nature too in its untamed and unorganized form is possessed with the mediation of a garland.

The garland plays the most significant role in making a social negotiation with the spiritual world. The gods or goddesses in Indian polytheism is brought to life with offering of garlands to the objectified spirit, making the idea of the supernatural and spiritual being come alive. The negotiations and dialogues with the assumed supremacy of the supernatural is made with offering of the flowers and garlands, thereby making the garland a source of power in its own right. The worshiper with a deeply ingrained cultural conditioning injects life into the worshiped with sacred agents like the flower and garlands. Nevertheless, material objects become the tool for the subject to appropriate its sacred space and in turn make the object meaningful, which otherwise would have a limited life close to its essential nature. In fact, in perpetual fusion and separation, the subject and object leave an imprint on one another, enabling a secondary objectivity. For instance, the idea of honour and an act of reverence is often accomplished with the exchange of a garland, thereby making the garland an object of purity that segregates one from the mundane/ordinary and at times the polluting/contaminating. Here we encounter the exchange of flowers as becoming a sort of subjective exercise in appropriation of meaning that helps define the status of the people concerned. But the construction of meanings is unfailing guided towards some sort of an objectified state of existence, whose manifestations are embedded in objects as well and vice versa. This highlights the experience of the world at the level of consciousness rather than as something assumed. The garland as an embrace of love, a string of refrain and at times a badge of honour traverses through networks of social relationships, possibly redefining and restructuring these 'sacrosanct' emotions, while reliving its archaic and predetermined expositions.

Reflecting upon the dialectics between the subject/object, nature/culture, human/non-human, one arrives at a very vital question of exchange, the feedback relation and consumption that enables performing specific social roles and forming consequent identities.

Here we can draw the difference between the material object as a gift and material object as a commodity. An ethnographic narration of the flower as a gift gives it a contrasting, yet crucial, position in the lives of the one being gifted and the one gifting it, beyond the mere intrinsic value of the object. The flower represents one's affection, gratitude, surrender and varied other emotions in its objectified intent. However, the return to the naturalness of the flower is not overruled as the beauty, freshness and newness of the just bloomed plays a significant role in it becoming a gift. The object garland or bouquet of flowers is consumed with a price for sure, but the exchange value is ascertained beyond its monetary proclaim. The material object does escape a death in immediate consumption/ lifeless commodification and finds an agency in itself, that which is appropriated by the man for realizing his own identity. Here the idea of 'being' gets intrinsically entwined and ascertained by the notion of 'having'. Interestingly, having (i.e. possessing/enjoying/connecting through objects) is often a social mode of being. 'Being' in all societies is infused with having, hence distributed among material things that people use, spend time with, live along and call their own. We often bond with objects as we bond with people through those objects.

The gift of flowers from one man to the other wraps in its scope the past, present and future nuances of time, and thus a relationship is bind in temporality and its lingering modes of revelation. The gift translates into a qualifying object for appropriating the future of the relationship, while becoming a cultural signifier. The temporariness and perishability of the material objects 'being', however, does not defeat its agency in defining and reconstituting human relationships. No matter how short its presence is, its objective social claims run far beyond its materiality. Hence, we see flowers and garlands being given away as gifts to perform several social functions and objectify structures of relationships that continue into future, even when the flowers have dried and ceased to be an object of use. Flowers as objects with exchange value (like other commodities) in comparison to its use value (such as gifts) illuminates the need for locating the social history or cultural biography of objects. Therefore, bringing to light the intricate politics of value and putting to table the precariousness in 'singularizing'¹ (Kopytoff 1986; Appadurai 1986) an object for reversing its value at any point. In reality, the

material objects often interplay between its exchange value and use value. At times, the exchange value that initiates an object's journey, later validates its social value overcoming the exchange value. In the process the man is deeply engaged with the object and develops fetishist attitude towards the possession that they now 'prize', hence set it apart and use it as a measure of distinction.

Hereby, the object-human relationship transcends to a new level, making both gain some influence and agency from each other. A sort of mutual sustainability is assumed between having something as a gift, possession, reward, utility or even as a fetish and it becoming a part of one's being. The analogical thought and corresponding actions necessitate humans to relate with sensory experiences of everyday and often these experiences are metaphorically articulated through objects. No wonder, we thus say, stubborn like an ox, cute like a rabbit, smooth like a glass, dry as a bone and cold as ice. These qualifications are essentially based on sensory experiences and similar experiences or ones further cultivated subjectively hint at the plethora of emotional practices one engages in with objects in one's lives. The material objects become signifiers of moments and momentariness as they start to journey along with the man, becoming something of 'significance' in their lives.

'Personhood' of an object: My toy of pretence

As we think and live through objects, it becomes natural to assign significant position to those things and transplant our thoughts and feelings into them. Bion (1975) in his psychoanalytic work said, "that we can only process, comprehend and accept overwhelming life experiences by working them through with a caring other - someone who can contain or safely hold us and on whom we can rely in constructing life-affirming rather than life-negating responses to unbearable experiences. But we can also feel contained and safe within our dwellings and neighbourhood, with our language, our treasured mementos and cultural values. This mutual sustainability of care givers, abstract ideas, home and similar places of assurance and material objects is predicted on our human capacity for playing with reality" (Jackson 2021: 169). The need to play with the material objects around us essentially upholds the human nature to oscillate between a mode of pretend,

whereby ideas and imaginations find life, and a mode of psychic equivalence, where those ideas and imaginations are made to live through some external objects in reality. Devereux in his book *From Anxiety to Method in Behavioural Sciences* (1967) recognizes the deep-seated desire to be recognized and responded to among all living beings. The urge is so strong that often human meanings are assigned to extra-human objects and phenomena for a responsive, thereby inter-subjective state of being. Man ends up using objects, images as surrogate people or ideas. In an attempt to connect with the unreachable and uncontrollable we find dolls, toys, figurines, icons or mascots to not only substitute but also bring them alive and closer - through talking to them, nursing and caring for them, and at times harming them too. In a similar vein, I would like to narrate a case study of the relationship that got projected upon a toy and its possessor.

Case: The girl and her dolls

Bulki Roy was a girl of six years when I met her at my maternal aunt's place during a visit in one of my summer vacations. She was found carrying a bag with two stuffed dolls and nursed them very dearly. The dolls were handmade and very finely decorated with fancy bows, ornaments and colourful dresses. Upon talking



Figure 1: Bulki and her stuff dolls.

Source: photo taken at Bangalore on 6th July, 2022

to Bulki, I learnt that both the dolls were girls and had names too. One she called 'Chuki' and the other was named 'Puki'. There was a noteworthy rhyme between the names of the dolls and that of Bulki, which she had herself assigned to her two stuff dolls. She revealed that she takes her dolls with her wherever she travels, as they are her daughters and she cannot leave them stranded. Since they turn dirty often, she also gives them a bath and dresses them up. For a child of six years it isn't strange to find embodiment of some loving and fond relationships through toys. Children associate their presumable adult roles in a transitory playing around with toys and human figurines. But the interesting cue here was that the material object was not confined to its transitory role only. It

surprisingly lived through Bulki and her journey into the life ahead. And at times it also connected to her past and unsure initiation into this world. Bulki was an adopted child of my aunt and was made aware of the same in her initial years. She apparently never disclosed any displeasure or uncanniness in her bonding with her present set of parents. But she surely did say at times, "ami kintu Chuki o Pukir maa, ami oder chere kothao jabo na" (I'm the mother of Chuki and Puki and I shall never abandon them). I later also learnt that her present mother too took similar care of the two dolls as Bulki. One day I overheard my aunt say to her maid, "don't throw the dolls on the sofa so carelessly, they too get hurt. The mother and daughter seem to have found reflections of their missing ties in predetermined social statuses and bonds through the two dolls. Therefore, both seem to nurture the dolls and find reasons to mitigate their respective denials in roles of motherhood and that of being born as a daughter to unknown parents, respectively, by imparting life to the toys. I met Bulki again when she had turned 22. She was now a professional singer. In her mellifluous voice she rehearsed for hours in the night with her same two dolls as devoted audience. She said, "her daughters (the two dolls) inspire her in the dark lonely nights to sing songs and put them to sleep". After 16 years the dolls had surely lost their material sheen. They were shabbier than before and faded too, as regular wear and tear had taken its toll. But they were no way dirty or old for Bulki, rather they had new bright dresses to wear and broken arms repaired. Bulki was quite annoyed with me when I suggested her to buy two new dolls and call them by the same name. she said, "I know that Chuki has lost her vision as her eyeballs have been pierced and puki's arm is fractured. But she takes good care of them and they are still her only medium of connection to her past. It is from her that I learnt that there are special shops that repair old dolls. Therefore, we see a socially reproduced idea of affection and affliction that gets infused into material things and especially those that have an artificially manufactured organic existence. The overlapping emotions and clueless socio-historical location places man into a strangely negotiable relationship with material things around them. However, it's not every object that pervades their world of experiences and imaginations, rather there are few hand-picked ones that constitute a personhood in tandem with the

intersubjective lifeworld of the man. Subjective attributes and significant life experiences find expression through material objects.

There is some sort of a psychic struggle in bolstering one's sense of self through a materially manipulated object. An affectual labour is deployed to construct a desired person out of some material objects so that one can necessarily confide into and live along with it, corporeally as well as psychosomatically at times. To draw a parallel of the case I discussed with regard to the two dolls and their possessor, I would like to mention here Hoskins's (1998) fascinating account of how magical imagination is facilitated by objects in her ethnography of Kodis of Sumba in Eastern Indonesia. Hoskins reiterates that often subjects that were kept hidden and publicly sequestered, found subtle expression in stories knit around their material possessions. She narrates an account:

A young girl I knew well never confessed her feelings of romantic longing and later disappointment to me directly, but she was fascinated by the story of a magic spindle that flew through the air to snare a beloved. When later her own hopes were cut off, she sent a message to her lost lover through the secret gift of the object.... A famous singer and healer who also wanted a female companion, composed long ballads to his drum, introducing each ritual session with a history of efforts to cover the drum properly so it could be pierced by a male voice and travel to the heavens.... Another man, famed as a storyteller and bard, said he received his "gifts of words" in the simple, woven betel bag he carried with him at all times. (Hoskins 1998: 3)

Finally, objects become surrogate for people, objective correlatives for subjective experiences and relationships, and metaphors for emotive expressions. Hoskins insists that often objects act as the container for finding some sort of personification in an intersubjective life, that which builds between the material object and the man. Material objects traverse through life situations to satisfy the man's existential needs, provide security, extend love and sense of pride too, along with ensuring wellbeing and mutual recognition between the object and subject. Ontologically a 'self' comes to exist and function through appropriation of many 'others', and that other could possibly be even found in some material object. From ontological metaphors for 'being' and

'becoming' to acting as containers, material objects constitute a crucial intersubjective relationship with the man and his socio-cultural life. More often than not in locating the personhood of material things one encounters the 'transitional objects' like toys, gifted dried flowers, betel bags and other similar ones, which man uses to manage their inevitable and at times circumstantial separation, change, loss and other traumas facing them.

Trying to understand biographies of objects one necessarily attaches a sense of 'personhood' to it and ask questions that would offer answers in its own right. It becomes sociologically imperative to locate the biographical possibilities in an object and initiate queries such as: where does it come from? Who makes it? The journey and significant age in the life of an object, and finally the cultural markers it adorns on varying occasions to reach the end of its usefulness. All these questions necessarily qualify for the object to become a category having a social and cultural 'status' distinct in any given temporality. I shall return to the discussion of flowers here to hint at how objects are used for particular occasions and how people of distinct classes earmark them differentially. Roses or orchids as choices become a good marker of a class position and the associated culture that they promise to extend. The scarce availability and the long draw social history of these flowers as signifiers of opulence and extraordinariness determines its class association/position and thereby its social significance. Similarly, the intrinsic nature of the flower and its 'uncelebrated being' in the wilds can also shape its biographies in interaction with the subject that associates with it. The flowers that are culturally unidentified and untagged can have stories to speak when turned into a gift, thereby crossing class barriers built for it in unrecognition. When a flower growing in the wild is plucked and incorporated into a garland or a bouquet and offered to a person, it either transcends the class location it emerges from or possibly reinstates the same through the agency of the maker/creator of the same. The man who makes the garland amidst the nature and then sells it in the market possibly plays a contributory role in the life of the object, as much as the one who possesses it and places it within his/her socio-cultural context. But the man who weaved the garland, when offers it as a gift to the other he attached new meanings in the life of the object from a different social status and corresponding role. Thus, things too can objectify

the person who produces and makes use of them. Once the thing circulates in a different network and context, its life gets recontextualized and attain a different personhood with new set of objectifications by the subject in question. Thus, a garland combines stories of people from different cultural contexts, social events and other material objects along its path while moving across extended territories. In fact, the study of material objects could possible coax one to invert these binaries between object-subject, banal-exotic, real-artificial, appearances-existences, determining-agentive.

Objects and their transcending images

While talking of biographies of objects and implying inversion of binaries, one obviously comes close to locating the 'social' embedded in the object. The social is codified through collective norms and sanctions of the time and objects assuming a 'personhood' embodies the same with indications into the future. In fact, the object acquires two kinds of personhood: one that contains and retains the wider socio-cultural manifestations, and another that attempts sending some forms and practices out with a hope that it shall reflect back upon the man and his intersubjective construction of the social. The projection into the future is something very integral to an object. The garland is thereby sent out with an intent on the part of the original guardian (biographer) with the hope of an informed reaction and at times something novel ones, thereby revealing possibilities of a not-so-presumed and predictable future. To maintain the structures and constructing social relations, the garland plays the dramaturgical role with the subject. The offering of the garland on varied occasions becomes an act immensely powerful as much as the garland itself as an object existing independently in relation to the one offering it and the culture in focus. The garland invites enough agency to itself once it is placed upon a man, woman or even the image of the either, getting integrated into a specific role that the subject and associated others are assigned to perform. However, once the garland accomplishes reinstating the social values in its own capacity it is treated as something having an afterlife in sync with the cultural conditions that brought it to life. Thus, its future is

determined by the subjects (man), who initially stood interface with new junctures of negotiations by the same object (garland).

The flower or the garland returns to its naturalness, having had a life of cultural significance over a specific temporal and spatial condition. Interestingly, objective imageries or more concrete physical images transpire into the future, celebrating the agency of the same. The original flower and the garland get replaced with dried flowers or plastic garlands to uphold the life emerging from an infusion between the subject and the object thereafter, building memories around the object more often than not. Here needs the mention of the manipulation of objects that occurs in tandem with the subjects manoeuvring of his or her life stories in a fast-transforming cultural landscape and with rhythms of living in and out of the same. Winnicott in his seminal study of material objects and its transcending as well as transitional role points to how manipulation of objects, abstract ideas and personas in an external, physical and social environment becomes more important than mere corroboration of imageries and fetish for material things. Therefore, we project material objects as real with attributes qualifying for a social life, though not denying that the appearances they assume are often moulded through subjective mediation and qualitative transactions. "... the intrapsychic manipulation of images of these things (symbolic disguise, displacement, repression, projection, reversal, rationalization, scotomatization) is enabling human beings to come to terms with distressing situations. Both fantasizing and ritualizing are predicted on the logic of inter-subjectivity. By this, it means that all human beings tend to equate or draw analogies between, their relationships with other persons, their relationships with their own thoughts and emotions and their relationships with things, ideas, and words" (Jackson 2021: 174).

Case: Jewellery, artefacts and a cultural journey

Having talked of objects and their personhood and then mentioning of their transcendental images that define and at times redefine physical and cultural boundaries, I would like to highlight on the latter hereon. Material objects come to life as they gain cultural significance in a particular tradition and community. They become the symbolic harbinger of cultural forms and processes.

No matter how personalised a material object is for someone and how intricately it imbibes the subjective experiences and emotions of the man concerned, it surely attains a culturally objectified form simultaneously as it transcends historicity and geographies. A detailed phenomenology of diverse lives brings to surface the compelling aspects of human relationship with material objects (non-human and animated ones too). Through regular and at times sporadic engagement with them we cut across the plurality of cultural contexts and synoptically live with moments, ideas, imaginations and beliefs from varied cultures and its process, transpired materially and thereafter ideationally. The tendencies to essentialise our experiences beyond the materiality of the things we speak of our existential perspectives as emerging through them. While living a life expressed through strong emotions and ritual processes, we extend our own selves bodily and sensibly via material things, which carry cultural cues of journey made by them in becoming what they are to us at a given point in time. In reinforcing our cultural lives, we grant subjective primacy to the objects often and allow their agentive reciprocity to continually feed into our socio-cultural landscapes. The will and consciousness we seek in the material things around us and fondly associate ourselves with as marker of our socio-economic lives, could possibly unravel the power of any cultural history to proliferate its temporality and transcend time. Thus, the trans-embodied accounts of knowing, feeling, imagining, and consequent building of ideas of another cultural form and process is initiated at times through material objects. To account for such a cultural journey through material objects in our everyday lives, I would like to narrate a case of a piece of jewellery and human negotiations entwined with it.

I always fancied wearing silver jewellery, especially the ones studded with 'semi' precious stones. I value these delicate pieces of artefacts much more than a 'lakh-worth' gold ornament. At times the mere appearance of them as something with a silvery white shine is enough for it to qualify as a good piece of silver. However, the idea here is not to probe into metallic evaluation and its monetary exchange in place. What I rather desire is a cultural reorientation to the self-adornment tendencies nurtured quite passionately by owning and thus exhibiting delicate and intricate pieces of art. One of these silver pieces of artefacts is a



Figure 2: Jewellery with Tibetan motifs and design. Source: photo taken at a Curio shop in Kalimpong.

silver earring that I carry close from the Tibetan tradition of jewellery making out of ‘Thogchag’ in the Himalayan region. ‘Thogchag’ is a metal extracted from meteorites and tektites rich in iron content. Many myths and mythologies are associated with the use of this metal, believing it to be a harbinger of good luck. However, recently as I was insistent on purchasing ones made of pure silver, I learnt that these earrings are made upon melting old Chinese silver coins. My derision over ‘made in china’ labels rushed down me and the inestimable artefactual pride overwhelmed. I just wondered, how borders are still porous in a subjectively-objective world. No matter how vacuously we like to see within and without our borders, and continue ‘othering’ across the imaginatively crafted lines, we transcend them in our everyday living and livelihood makings. The artistic imaginations, the ethnic labour and designs of tradition embedded in these precious commodities and mere stones add value and supreme valour as they cross geographical borders. Gradually they become exemplifiers of units of life upon passage into remote corners of the globe. The act of Neighbouring with geographical borders fast turn into neighbouring with objects, physical dynamism and behavioural attributes, and notions of utility and style alongside. No matter how hard we try, we can’t live in reverse osmosis or complete cleansing, as our faith lies in absorbing things ‘out there’ that adorn our senses and sensibilities ever after. Nevertheless, a piece of earring or a pendant, even though studded with turquoise and coral (coming from locations far away from the Himalaya) finds enclosure in alien culture scape through subjective appropriation in an objectively far-away piece of land. There remains the beauty of an ever-irresolute culture, which possibly comes to thrive by assimilating yet distinctly resonating variance through its material forms.

The account of jewellery as a cultural marker and also an objective source for assimilation and variance surely hints at how jewellery qualifies as emotional agents, guiding our location in the social hierarchy and also relationships between humans. From birth to marriage and even after death a piece of jewellery significantly

carries forward the intersubjective roles (for e.g. The mother-daughter, the father and his sons, the mother-in law and her daughters-in-law) and corresponding ritual actions that arise through social sanctions and cultural mediations correspondingly. We can say that jewellery as a material object assume the image of a signifier for relationships along a lineage of kin and thus the existing and freshly emerging social bonding from them. The images of objects and therefore a separate life independent of the subject might coax us to think of a completely new world of objects with newer meanings, extending beyond the biographical understanding. Baudrillard (1996) believes that things and specifically technological objects have a hyper-biography beyond man's control and comprehension. Baudrillard's theory of simulation and simulacra, which is the process whereby representation of things replaces the things being represented can possibly pose a critique of the notion of biography of objects. Man (subject) no longer has the power to participate in the object's physicality and their emergent biographies deeply-seated in their respective images after some time. Thus, a biography arises for the objects in separation from the subject, enforcing the subject/object incursions and cross imprints once again. To revisit the contradiction and relocate the integral infusion between the subject and object, I would like to reflect upon the painting 'Sunflower' by Vincent Van Gogh, a Dutch artist.

The artist while waiting for his friend Paul Gauguin to join him in the Provençal city of Arles in 1888, painted five audaciously decorative still lives of sunflowers in simple earthenware jugs. At least two of these canvases decorated Gauguin's bedroom when he reached the city late in October, and the French painter happened to admire them greatly. Always defensive about the tragic outcome of his stay - it ended with Van Gogh's self-mutilation and madness - Gauguin later claimed that the sunflower paintings directly reflected his own good advice, generously offered in Arles. The images of the flowers were made to objectify the relationship that he shared with his friend, though it gained its own right in years to come on varied audience appropriating it differentially. The object of art was segregated from the artist and gained appreciation as a series of motifs along history and trans-geography, and thereby constructed a biography of the creator as well as his created image simultaneously. The



Figure 3: Sunflower painting by Vincent Van Gough. Source: Wikipedia (National Gallery, London)

image of the flowers that were crafted for expressing his love for his friend became a powerful object, shedding light on Van Gogh's life who died in 1890 and became the much-celebrated artist in 1990s, 100 years later. Nevertheless, the object and its images that gained much 'singularity' as a fine piece of art, regains relevance and contextuality when de-singularised, and compared to its initiator (the artist) or the subjective interfaces that determined the biographical expression and exuberance in its coming to 'being'. Cultural Sociologists have always preoccupied themselves with asking questions about why a particular genre of art emerge in a particular time and space, more than asking what the symbols of the genre indicate about the time and its relational possibilities (Kaufman 2004: 337). Dewey in *Art as Experience* said, "Aesthetic experience is always more than aesthetic. In it a body of matters and meanings, not in themselves aesthetic, become aesthetic as they enter into an ordered rhythmic movement towards consummation. The material itself is widely human" (Dewey 1934: 248). Therefore, there can be no denying of the affective grip of the objects and more so of the perceptions of those objects that guide our understanding from inside to outside and vice-versa. The intense and arduous labour of the artist subject upon its object makes him or her flow into the object, endowing it with subjectivity. Such labour gives way to a covenant between the self (man/creator) and the other (objects created) and thereon infusing free will into the materiality of the objects, as though the matter it holds is compounded with powers to reify social experiences and corresponding existences. Reflections on Turkish traditional art and artisans by Glassie are quite akin, he says, "the artists' gift suffuses an object with spirit" (Glassie 1993: 4)

Conclusion

Baudrillard's lament over objects self-organising capacities and man becoming less rational than his own objects, which run ahead of him (Baudrillard 1996: 50-51), can be put to positive revelation of objects becoming ontological extension of subject's existence and vice versa. We are gradually also exposed to the complexities of the mechanically produced objects and how often we remain short of grasping the efficacy they enjoy in relation to the subject. Thus, the metaphor in a biography of a flower and a garland fuses the natural and the cultural constructs of its subject in such an intertwined manner that one needs deep reflection in detachment from both to understand the subsumption of one another at play in the social world. It remains a challenge therefore, to think in terms of hybrids and quasi-objects² (Latour 1993) lying on the dividing line between the modern and post-modern reasoning of things. However, the insights that I sought to share here was that of material objects interaction with the human subjects and consequently changing their positions to qualify a social life that inherently traverses through these dialects of object-subject, self-other and appearance-reality. Materiality and consumption of the same is not merely limited to objectification of value external to us. Rather the consumers could be the objects themselves having an agency at play to manipulate, maneuverer and at times engage in bonds that appropriates their value in social construction of life. There needs to be a cognition of the vast world of material objects around us to understand our dependency on them and their hyper-images externally trying to impinge upon our self-conscious and apparently free existences. By extending subjectivity, thought, will and intentionality to world of objects, we necessarily impute vitality and agency to them, and by doing so we wish to gain certain predictability in our understanding of them. But our imagination when seen as congruent with the imaginations of the objects, we surely risk falling into the trap of consummation and breakage of life-sustaining links at some point. The objects produced, crafted and brought alive attains extreme reified forms that moves beyond our 'being' and negates all subjective negotiations gradually. Nevertheless, the human subjects obdurately become objects as the material objects acts upon us and our imaginations and desires touch them. Adorno discusses it like, "the subject enters into the object altogether differently from

the way the object enters into the subject. An object can be conceived only by a subject but always remains something other than the subject, whereas a subject by its very nature is from the outset an object as well . . . To be an object also is part of the meaning of subjectivity; but it is not equally part of the meaning of objectivity to be a subject." (Adorno 1998: 183). It mostly goes unnoticed how material objects, perishable and non-perishable and their images, acquire meaning only through projection of a form into them that qualifies for it becoming a cultural capital under some kind of performance in a context and time. Things are endowed with meaning by being put to use, perception, through touch, upon looking at it, while being looked at, mere habit and tactile engagement, at times in coincidence and other times through purposive conversations with them. Thus, matter is neither 'hard' nor 'soft', it doesn't lie out there all by itself, rather it is produced through performativity and performers in an enacted discourse.

Notes

1. The idea of singularizing is related to setting apart a certain portion of the physical environment and material world, marking it as 'sacred'. It is through singularization that societies often culturally draw distinctions and resist commoditization of others. Societies also re-singularise what was commoditized in need of social negotiation and change of statuses and orders. In every society, some things of social value are forestalled from getting commodified. Restrictions are created for appropriation of those objects collectively. These prohibitions are ways in which the society creates its political injunctions for controlling the mass and also serving interests of some. These singularized objects serve as symbolic inventory for organizing society into a hierarchical order. Public lands, monuments, art collections, royal residences, insignias, ritual objects, and so on become source of power and assert rights of their own in the future.
2. Researchers like Michel Serres and Bruno Latour propose that objects cannot be perceived either as 'soft' or 'hard', rather they are hybrid of both qualities and assume the character of quasi-objects. Such conception of quasi-objects

enables us to engage with a fresh episteme, whereby the material objects can be drawn into the social fabric of comprehension and acquiring soft elements. Before considering an object as a fact or a value and assume its forms or social functions, we must ponder on how the facts/values are intricately tied into a single whole. "Quasi-objects are much more social" (Latour 1993: 162) says anthropologist Bruno Latour. According to him quasi-objects are fabricated, therefore retaining the collective life, but at the same time they are not the vessel in which the wider notions of the society can be poured or looked in for. in no way the arbitrary receptacles of a full-fledged society. "On the other hand, they are much more real, nonhuman and objective than those shapeless screens on which society - for unknown reasons - needed to be 'projected'." (Latour 1993: 163)

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