QUESTIONING ORIGINALITY

By Ria Tagore

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In a constantly changing world, there is less space for originality to survive, let alone thrive. With artificial intelligence taking over our daily lives, there's a good chance that we soon end up in a world run by robots. But while that process is a work in progress, some of the world's finest robotic engineers are constantly trying to improvise robots and make them more "human-like" (rather- replications of human beings).

Thomas Wentworth Higginson once said that "Originality is simply a fresh pair of eyes" while François-Marie Arouet said "Originality is nothing but judicious imitation". My personal favorite was when William Inge said "Originality is undetected plagiarism".

I am not sure what a girl like me can say about this, that might not already be known, but I shall give it a try, because like Selena Gomez said "It's been said and done, every beautiful thought has already been sung, and I guess right now here's another one".

For years now, the debate of what is considered to be original has taken over the minds of intellectuals. Some of the earliest thinkers whose works and words are still studied, were Plato and Aristotle, who had extremely opposing ideas about this concept.

Plato argued that true originality comes from understanding and connecting with the perfect, immutable form; he was skeptical of artistic imitation, and viewed it as "thrice removed from reality", thus lacking in true originality. Aristotle, however, saw imitation as a natural, valuable and important process. He believed that creativity involves both imitation and innovation, where artists and thinkers improve upon and transform existing ideas.

Another direction of thought, that great minds like John Ruskin, William Wordsworth and T S Eliot believed in, was that originality and truthfulness in art comes from nature. They saw it as the ultimate source of inspiration. Some spoke about how it had endless forms, thus endlessly drawn from, some spoke about the profound connections between the human spirit and the natural world, some found inspiration in nature, while others believed that understanding nature was essential for creating anything.

I am unsure about this, because I find myself equally engaged, with similar results of the quality of the work I produce, whether I'm in my room, in a Starbucks, or around nature. Maybe being away from distractions helps us create and do things that our inner self wants us to and we listen to the voices of the heart, the soul, the mind as they all come together to make things that were never thought of before. But if that's not originality, I

am not sure what is. After all, the person, their emotions, their ability to create and their truthfulness towards their work matters, no matter what their field is, or who/ what their inspiration is.

However, in Plato's "Ion", he states that inspiration is a form of divine madness, a force that completely takes over the mind. According to Plato, true creativity and originality are gifts from God. It is a possession that elevates the artist beyond ordinary human capabilities. He said that "there is no invention in man until he has been inspired, and his senses and mind are no longer his own". Unless he achieves this state of no longer being himself, he is powerless but once he does, man is an "inspired rhapsodist" through whom God speaks.

This suggests that the source of originality is an external and almost mystical being that takes over the artist, irrespective of their surroundings. However, we see that the works of some of the finest and most renowned artists of the world do not come under the lines of what one might consider "original". They come from being inspired by their surroundings.

William Shakespeare himself "borrowed" plots and characters from existing works. However, he managed to surpass all his predecessors and "retold" those stories as masterpieces. Pablo Picasso was a passionate student of art, who again "borrowed" the forms and ideas that he often admired in artworks from different cultures and historical periods. The list goes on.

Let's take the example of the movies - Haider; Omkara; Maqbool, by Vishal Bharadwaj. They are film adaptations of Shakespeare's works - Hamlet; Othello; Macbeth, in modern India. However, these were again inspired by tales like "Gesta Danorum"; "Un Capitano Moro"; "Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland". We cannot be sure if even these were true original works.

It is said that Steve Jobs drew inspiration from Xerox PARC, for the graphical user interface and mouse. In the process, he revolutionized personal computing with the "Macintosh". But he could only do so by improving on existing technologies with superior design and user experience, not by going to the inception of the process. Similarly, Walt Disney revolutionized entertainment by creating a brand that commercialized and expanded on traditional stories. Again, he focused on retelling stories that had been told before, only in ways never experienced. The list goes on again.

We see that ideas or works that changed the world do not have much to do with originality, but majorly on how much further one takes the said idea/ work. It is about taking something original and molding it into something remarkable. The problem may lay in the fact that there is no clear definition of what constitutes originality, nor exists a definitive method to determine if something is original. Because no matter how original something may be, someone might have done/ said/ thought of something similar before and it no longer can remain to be completely original.

A great example of this can be the very fact that, although this piece is being written by me (a 20 year old girl, living in a metropolitan city, in the 21st century), my ideas have been conveyed by putting forward examples that have occurred way in the past. So in a way, this piece itself (despite being my original work) isn't a 100 percent original. It has bits and pieces of ideas that I have come across in my life.

Our experiences and surroundings shape us to be who we are, how we see life and everything around us. We often learn things that we pick up around us. Our ideas of various subjects like love, friendship, marriage, education, god, and so much more are built up by what we learn from the people around us, or areas like movies, books, tv shows, etcetera. And it is certain that these sources, people or places have gotten a hold of those subjects, further on, from everything around them.

After going through these facts and thoughts, the question comes up, what is originality in a true sense? Is it something that has never been done before or is it something that was never thought of before? Is there really a clear line between imitation and innovation or do you just have to be really careful while we are dealing with the two? And how does one remain original in what they create or come up with, when so much of what they are is not original itself?

Maybe the meaning of originality has changed over the years, and maybe that is what is important. Way back in time, people believed that originality comes from the artist being taken over by God because only God can produce original work. Now originality often overlaps with other factors. Maybe we will come to a point in the future where nothing will be original. Maybe we are in it now. What we need to realize is that, originality isn't something that can simply be taught or even explained.

People have spoken about this before, and people will continue to talk about it further. We cannot be sure what work is 100% original. Maybe it is dead, maybe it has been redefined into something completely different.

But we cannot stop ourselves from being us just because someone might have said or done something similar to what we want to do. I once heard that perfection comes from practice. Which means that if we want to perfect the art of originality, we may have to try to do it over and over again. But by that point of time it will lose its meaning. It is truly a dilemma to understand this.

So as I come to the end of this piece, I give you this- Be the most original self you can be. Live the way your mind, heart and soul tell you to, because if you don't, someone will come along and do it better, and chances are that they succeed, while you are forgotten even before you were known. Dance when you want to and let the rhythm move you. Write whenever inspiration strikes, note down your thoughts and emotions. Speak your heart out, even if no one is listening. Create without boundaries and pursue your passions, even if no one wants you to.

That is the only way for you to be the original you and for you to get ahead of the originality question.