

# Death, Dystopia and Darkness: Reading Abjection in Ganesh Pyne's paintings

SRIJANI DUTTA

## **ABSTRACT**

The modernist artists usually experiment with different styles and forms in order to project the uncertainty, crisis, existential crisis, and fragmentation of bodies and the spiritual death of their contemporary era. Ganesh Pyne, one of the famous Modern Indian Painters heavily borrowed the ethos and tone from the works of the European Modernist masters' while depicting them in his distinct style. His style is often marked by absurdism and several figures in his paintings are grotesque, distorted and dark. The distorted figures seem to be rooted in a dystopic reality. This essay tries to read the politics of representation of death, dystopia and abjection in Ganesh Pyne's paintings.

## **KEYWORDS**

Dystopia, death, grotesque, absurdism, abjection

The richness of Indian art compels us to read and revisit paintings in conjunction with the socio-political and artistic milieu they are products of. A deviation from the Ravi Verma School of painting where European realism was integrated with Indian iconography, the experimental art of Gaganendranath Tagore (cubist paintings,

social caricature, use of Japanese techniques) and many others from the Bengal School of Art. An inheritor of the reactionary and anti-colonial Bengal School, Ganesh Pyne also drew on Rembrandt's use of chiaroscuro and Paul Klee's simplicity. This essay attempts to locate the absurdist traits in Ganesh Pyne's paintings in response to his changing social and political scenario. This essay aims to establish how he contributes to a new aesthetic of creation in Modern Indian Art. This essay also attempts to read Ganesh Pyne's depiction of absurdism and abjection in his paintings. In doing so, the essay will read his paintings in conjunction with the literary works of the representatives of the Absurdist movement like Beckett and Pinter.

A far cry from the excesses of Romanticism, Ganesh Pyne's paintings invoke absurdism, violence and dystopia. Violence and abjection exist as two sides of the same coin. Abjection can be termed as the outcome or the result of violence. According to Julia Kristeva, abjection is a feeling that is caused by blood, dead body, pus, wastages etc. It is a sensation where there is no proper law, meaning and reason. The demarcation between subject and object creates the environment of abjection. When someone sees a dead body, the sight can awaken a deep feeling of terror, nausea and abjection in the spectator's mind. Similarly, Ganesh Pyne's paintings potently evoke abjection in the mind of the readers. The darkness in his paintings sets an intensely dystopic landscape foretelling apocalypse. The stench of death looms large over his paintings creating a subtext of fear and annihilation. In the dystopian settings of his paintings, human figures co-exist with animals and birds. His paintings attract the readers with their hypnotic charm and surreal tendencies. The characters are painted as solitary figures, like the creator himself. One can find a subtle romanticism integrated with dark, poetic melancholia in his paintings highlighting certain nuances of the narratives and myths chosen.

In Modernist paintings, the body is often a metaphorical site

reflecting the psychological sufferings of the human mind. In addition to being influenced by European masters like Rembrandt and Paul Klee, Ganesh Pyne's artistic consciousness was formed by World War II, the Bengal Famine of 1943, the Indian Independence Movement and the Partition of the Indian subcontinent. The grotesqueness of his figures is not of the body but of the circumstances—the body mirrors the turbulence and the grimness of the reality in which the human figures are forced to survive. He creates a new aesthetic of the grotesque that exists alongside his characteristic romantic melancholia, surrealism, poetic mysticism and fantasy. The poignant symbol of death inflects his world—existential, nihilistic and absurd in nature. The absurd, dislocated characters search for meaning in the purposeless world resulting in dystopia. Ganesh Pyne's paintings such as 'The Prince', 'Moon and the Horns', 'The Pond', 'Fisherman', 'Raktakarabi' produce a sense of terror in the minds of the spectators.

Absurdism is a socio-cultural-psychological movement that deals with the existential crisis and philosophy of being. It shows the misery, suffering and the absurd, bizarre condition of human existence. It attempts to question the root cause of human suffering in a purposeless world. Everything is marked by the sense of nothingness. In absurdist plays, notions of fragmented selfhood and failure of communication pervade. In Pyne's 1979 painting, 'The Cobbler', the mechanization of human life and a deep sense of monotony are foregrounded. Poverty becomes an undercurrent in this ultimate picture of a drudgery ridden, monotonous life. Even in the "Bird" series, the vulnerability of the birds is amplified and they are placed at the mercy of an unfeeling or even cruel external force. Pyne's paintings remind us of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, where time seems to be suspended and nothingness permeates the text. Pyne's paintings premise themselves on silence, daily grind and meaninglessness.

While the resonances of European art is discernible in Pyne's art,

his use of Indian mythology, folklore and history is also prominent. He used his canvases to represent cultures and practices from the subcontinent. However, in these too, the sense of gloom and desolation are unmissable. In the painting 'Death,' the face of a creature, spectral and pale, conjures a sense of something terrible. In this painting, the creature destabilizes the binary between self and other and the image becomes a mirror where we see our reflection. The sense of uncanny is overwhelming because there are other shadowy distorted figures around the central figure of Death. If dystopia refers to an imagined space/ society that is chaotic, barbaric, lawless and fearful, Pyne's paintings do not point to a disorderly future but recognises the dystopic in his own time period. Having witnessed cataclysmic episodes like the Bengal Famine and Partition, his consciousness locates acute suffering and despondency in and around him. The 'Bird' series portray the bird as an uprooted and displaced being with a destroyed nest. The background is grey and black. In the painting 'Hanuman', the burning red eyes and the emaciated face is in contradistinction to the conventional representations of this Hindu god. Fear and terror become the attributes of Hanuman as he is transported from a mythical time to the dystopic present. The painting "Apu" illustrates the disconnect between man and nature. The innocence of the child is in contrast to the bare branches of the tree. The falling leaves communicate a gradual sense of loss as the child's piercing eyes look at us. In the painting 'Rider on the Threshold', the lifeless, puppet-like figure sits on a toy horse. Though the rider holds an arrow, one can hardly perceive the warrior figure as anything more than a dummy. The warrior's power is an empty one implying the modern man's lack of agency and power over society and life. A similar helplessness colours paintings like 'Lamp and The Effigy', 'Ape and the Flower' and 'Skeleton'. The painting 'Skeleton' depicts the anxiety and misery of human existence and death becomes the overwhelming reality in all these paintings.

Concurrently, paintings like ‘Rama’, ‘Hanuman’, ‘Duhsala’, ‘The Sage’, ‘Panchali’, ‘Lakshmi Emerging’ draw on characters from Indian mythology but they have lost the glory and reverence of their former selves. The play of familiar and unfamiliar is also contingent on Pyne’s use of colours—dark and dismal. His paintings thematically remain ‘Indian’ but stylistically borrow heavily from ‘European modernist’. In offering a new aesthetic of abjection, Pyne not only “raises the ghosts of the past” as declared by the actor, Barun Chanda, in the documentary on the artist but also forebodes apocalypse.

## WORKS CITED

- Esslin, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Doubleday, 1969.
- Kapur, Geeta. *When Was Modernism? Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India*. Tulika Books, 2000.
- Mitter, Partha. *Indian art*. Oxford UP, 2001.
- <https://www.christies.com/features/Artist-Guide-Ganesh-Pyne-10282-1.aspx>. 23 Mar. 2026.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*. Columbia UP, 1982.
- Bandyopadhyay, Debmalaya. “Ganesh Pyne: A Dreamer of Darkness.” *Indigenous*, 2021.
- Ghose, Arun. “Jottings as paintings of Ganesh Pyne.” Sanchit Art Publications, 2014.
- Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot*. Grove Press, 1954.
- <https://share.google/4UavA1oxUdmUHlyLr>. 23 Mar. 2026.
- [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/61a76dee225b8d381c48c4f4/t/625fecc1201c011151cff4c4/1650453728388/Press+Release++Ganesh+Pyne\\_+From+the+Shadows+2022.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/61a76dee225b8d381c48c4f4/t/625fecc1201c011151cff4c4/1650453728388/Press+Release++Ganesh+Pyne_+From+the+Shadows+2022.pdf). 23 Mar. 2026.
- [https://prinseps.com/research/contradictions-ganesh-pyne-oeuvre/?srsltid=AfmBOop7k0b7dvUTOqOK7kvN6fy\\_DBa4We-B0q5toN8V1YJJPdKHfZ-f](https://prinseps.com/research/contradictions-ganesh-pyne-oeuvre/?srsltid=AfmBOop7k0b7dvUTOqOK7kvN6fy_DBa4We-B0q5toN8V1YJJPdKHfZ-f). 23 Mar. 2026.
- <https://share.google/j56ALKukA1xRBwRDG>. 23 Mar. 2026
- <https://share.google/f67UGgA2BD1HIIQLS>. 23 Mar. 2026