



LOCATING THE FEMINIST STRAIN IN THE MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY WOMEN ARTISTS OF INDIA

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ABSTRACT :

In the recent past the two most radical approaches to art history in the west have been influenced by Marxism and feminism. In the west these new approaches were seminal in foregrounding the critique of the nineteenth century formalism, the aesthetic relativism of "art for arts sake" on the one hand and stress the significance of social and economic view of art and cultural context.¹



KEYWORDS : *Marxism and feminism , aesthetic relativism , significance of social and economic.*

INTRODUCTION

The cultural context in the view of Marxism meant that the artist is a worker and art is production. Marx held that art was not something that belonged in an ivory tower inhabited by aestheticians, but rather it is grounded in the larger context of socio-economic machinery of history. The anti-formalist stance finds a louder echo in writings of Bertolt Brecht who believed that mere form was not enough and that art must convey a social message. The cultural context in the feminist view meant that art cannot be understood outside context. The feminist discourse highlighted the way art history has been reduced as a patriarchal construct where both the artist and the audience is male. Feminists argue that for a long time the art historians have depicted women with sheer discrimination where the role of a women is either reduced to an object (male gaze) or someone less/inferior to man (arts versus crafts).

In Indian art the traditional iconography has for long depicted women as 'mother earth'. The notion of women as extension of nature is a classical position shared both by traditional art of India and west by means of which the feminine fertility and motherhood are invoked in art.² Gender representation foregrounds the discourse of representation and spectatorship. In her critique of Vidya Dehejia's article "Representing the Body: Gender Issues in Indian Art", Parul Dev Mukherji refers to the 'concept of visuality and how it can be productively deployed to bring together the gender issues and the politics of visual representation.' By visuality, she means the 'relationship between the visual representation and what it refers to in the visible world to be not an absolute one but necessarily culture-specific.'³ Mukherji refers to the recent research on the art of Italian Renaissance, which contests the assumptions that the art produced under women patrons was necessarily any different from that patronized by men. Women as patrons, as glorified by feminist art historians in the west, may have had some implication for their status in society but 'in terms of power representation and control of meaning, women patronized art may not significantly differ from the standard modes of representation.' Dehejia's claim that unlike the demeaning representation of

woman as an extension of nature in the western art 'the affiliation of women in nature and fertility has positive connotations' in the early Indian art. Mukherjee, however, contests: "It will be simplistic to assume that the abundance of images of women standing for fertility and auspiciousness implied their higher social status. A more relevant question to be asked is who had the agency to represent women thus and the fact that at times women patronized art in no way should suggest that images constructed will fundamentally depart from the accepted norms of visual culture."⁴ She highlights the interface/interconnectedness between gender issues and the politics of representation vis-à-vis feminist and post-structuralist Art History.

In the west, the feminism came of age with the premise where it stood for equality while celebrating differences. The feminist art historians have been considerably successful to re-write history and rediscover the contribution of women as artists and patrons of art. However, it was not until the 1970s that feminism became a significant movement in the western art world. In India, all though, the significant presence of women as artists surfaced in 1970s, it took quite a while to notice the self-conscious stance of feminist discourse in their works. In the west the feminist art historians were able to document the contribution of women patrons and artists from as far as fourteenth-century, which was greatly recognized. European queens as great patrons of art, medieval nuns as copyists and illuminators, painters and sculptors of Renaissance and Baroque to the artists of nineteenth and twentieth century.⁵

In India, however, there is no documented history of women artists before twentieth century. As Gyatri Sinha points out: "Baring Amrita Sher Gil's privileged position, as artists women were not consciously cultivated or accorded political or private patronage in the manner of Ravi Verma, Nandalal Bose or later M. F. Husain."⁶ Amrita Sher Gill's Indian experience is primarily known for seeking a certain aesthetic empathy for the poor Indians and particularly poor Indian women. However, the women in Amrita's paintings vis-à-vis the representation of women in western art, where from she learnt her first lessons of art practice, is at a significant variance with that of the west and its Indian counterparts, for instance, Ravi Verma. Ravi Verma's representation of women is structurally entrenched in the canons of western art, which recalls as Berger would write: "*Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in her-self is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.*"⁷

The comparison between the two foregrounds an interesting irony. Unlike Sher-Gill, Verma was never, physically, a part of western schooling. His interaction with the western art practice was a colonial phenomena. Sher-Gill on the other hand had all her training in the European systems, particularly, being a student at the elite Ecole des Beaux. Yet she manages to bypass the colonial impregnation. In this sense Sher-Gill's position's a post-colonial addressal to the gender representation in Indian art.

Unlike Verma's representation of women in his paintings, which align with the western art's objectification of woman as an object of desire, Sher-Gill's women are still and silent in their self-composed solitude. Her women are both the surveyor and surveyed. They reflect a deliberate/obstinate oblivion to the male surveillance, to the male gaze, and hence are neither being looked at nor watch themselves being looked at. Sher-Gill's overtly feminist focus on the social reality of women lies in their sheer emptiness, alienation or loneliness they manifest as a testimony of being a woman in a rural India.

From the feminist perspective Amrita's presence in India has a twofold implication. On the one hand, was it an outcome of metropolitan exile that she felt compelled to rediscover her paternal lineage by shunning her maternal privileges that she was driven to come to India and interpret poor Indians. And on the other hand, foregrounding Sher Gill's presence as a positive attribute, can be seen in terms of a symbol of empowerment by setting an example that women in India too can lead a life of a self-independent artist. Thus, as Sinha states: "For an Indian woman painter, Amrita Sher Gill is inheritance." In the similar vein, Sher Gill's equation with Gauguin foregrounds a conflicting paradigm. Sher Gill's relation to Gauguin is not only stylistic but more of an ideological one: as for Gauguin Tahiti meant 'to produce something new', 'a return to the original source', 'the childhood of mankind'. Tahiti meant a reverse of all European values and its so-

called 'civilization'. More than anything else, one may say, Sher Gill shares Gauguin's flight from 'civilized' to the un-civilized, which appears more to do with the colonial discourse rather than to the feminist.

After the death of Sher-Gil in 1941, at an awfully early age of 28, the post-independent modern art scene saw a handsome presence of women artists. Pilloo Pochkhanawala, who starting off as a conventional sculptor, is better known for her 1960s and 70s experimental work involving her welding technique and using fragments of discarded iron and steel. Her work is, at large, complicit with the formalistic canons of form and medium as translated by the likes of Moore, Brancusi and Calder. Though rigorous in experimentation and monumental in scale, her work chooses to remain reluctant to share the radicalism of feminist discourse. However, Pochkhanawala is significant for choosing sculpture over painting and this stance in itself is dauntless, particularly, in the context of Indian art scene. As she would say: "The painting did not ruffle my composure unlike the new sculpture... I was seized by the feat of the challenge of tackling something so difficult."⁸

After Sher-Gil one of the most significant artist of first generation of women artists in India is Meera Mukherjee. Mukherjee shares a tagential equation with the feminist position in its critique of the gap between arts and crafts. These traditional categories of art have been contested by the feminists in the west where crafts has generally been practised by females, while as the so-called higher arts such as painting, sculpture and architecture is controlled by the men. Feminists have questioned the hierarchy where the craft is treated as lesser art because women do it. Mukherjee's sustained significance lies in her self-conscious position to engage with the artisans and the folk art form. And she carried it to various dimensions by not just adapting and employing the metal techniques of Bastar and Dhokra craftsmen but also taking up projects and writing on the metalcrafts of India.

Nasreen Mohamedi, on the other hand, was the first Indian women artist who sought to identify with abstraction, an aesthetic paradigm pursued, until then, only by male artists of India. Her identification with abstraction was partly grounded in the avant-garde of the west as she had the privilege to study in London's St. Martin's School of Art in 1954-57 and in Paris during 1961-63. Besides she has travelled extensively. She also was a great traveller and had the opportunity to travel as far as the deserts cities of Gulf, Turkey, Europe, Japan and North America. Though she felt reassured in Kandinsky's assertion "the need to take from an outer environment and bring it an inner necessity" but at a deeper level her aesthetic sensibility was nourished on the principles of Oriental aesthetics (particularly in the Indian classical music such as the vocals of Amir Khan, Gangubai Hangal, and Bhimsen Joshi).

Nasreen's mature phase of 1970s positions her addressing a cross-cultural paradigm where on the one hand she imbibes the minimalism/conceptual 'graphic conjunctions' of Agnes Martin and on the other hand incorporates the 'perceptual consciousness, phenomenological knowledge and its mysterious perspicacity' of Sufi discourse as meditated by the likes of Jalaludin Rumi. Rumi's "Those who know, cannot Tell" becomes her leitmotif as the first women artist of India who choose to "express herself in a language that is neither painterly nor linguistic – rather close to something graphic, architectural, geometric, and yet significantly different from all these defined patterns".⁹

Shubhalakshmi Shukla locates Nasreen Mohamedi in the backdrop of Baroda in the mid-1960s to mid-1980s, when there was a renewed interest in figurative mode of art practice where human body becomes the central code, Shukla writes: "This is also the time for the emerging feminist consciousness where the women artists started to adopt the idea of parody or pun to connote the commodified body in context, for example, Nilima Sheikh in *The Story of Champa*, N. Pushpamal in *The Girl with a Frilled Frock*, or Rekha Rodwittiya in creating a metaphor of rape iconising a subject who is undisturbed by the loss, an ethical presentation of the vulnerable yet empowered self. These artists construe the body as vessel, a significant whole, to invest the themes of pun and trauma."¹⁰ In this backdrop Mohamedi's "abstract expressions is a reference to "class" of women whose everyday chore is washing and cleaning, she frames an artist whose preoccupation is to engage in everyday cyclic orders, a philosophical guide to her formalist engagements."¹¹

Arpita Singh's (b.1937) paintings are imbued with a strange aura where the living and the inanimate appear to be engrossed in a secret communication. Drawing largely from the day to day domestic space of a woman, Arpita anticipates a feminine condition where her female figures share an enigmatic imaginary world with things like jars, bottles, tablecloths, chairs, apples, a paper boat, picture frames, flowers. The Chagallesque flying figures, the invading objects, and the animated inanimate objects are somewhat counteracted by the women figure who usually appears still or absentminded. Arpita's work is not existentially morbid, but her distinctiveness lies in the subtle use of wit and humor to illuminate the complex and distraught. Her response to feminine concerns is not confined to the domestic space. The notable references are the stories of Kidwai family and the aftermath of the Sikh 1984 riots in Delhi, which anticipated the potentially protective image of the woman in acts of nurturing the girl child. And in a recent series of her works called *Feminine Fable*, (1997) Arpita is addressing the ageing woman's sexual self, a conspicuously feminine condition. As Gayatri Sinha writes: "Perhaps even among her world contemporaries, no single artist has produced a body of works on feminine acts of reparation, love and the deeply tragic vicissitudes of domesticity as Arpita Singh."¹²

One of the classical examples of feminist intervention is Nilima Sheikh's work *When Champa Grew Up*, 1984. As Nilima Sheikh (b. 1945) would recall: "Champa was my neighbor's daughter, who was tortured and burnt for dowry."¹³ Based on a series of twelve small tempera paintings the narrative framework of the work retells the profoundly tragic account of a young girl who after her arranged marriage is tortured and burnt alive by her in-laws for not fulfilling their demands of dowry.

The legacy of the radical artists and the pedagogy of BinodeBihari Mukherjee and RamkinerBaj, the tutelage under Subramanyan, and the close association with Ghulam Sheikh provide the essential impetus to Nilima Sheikh. Like Meera Mukherjee, Sheikh too shares a deep cord with the classical dichotomy between crafts and high art, a condition that has been in the forefront of feminist interrogation in the west. Sheikh's passionate engagement with the 'living traditions', owing to her schooling at Baroda, is intricate and pronounced by means of her intimate adoption of *Wasli* technique of tempera of the medieval Indian miniatures. The laborious and meticulous care involved in laminating of several sheets or handmade paper which are coated and covered with whitening in several layers before being painted on with soft and brilliant cake colors with the use of fixer.¹⁴

NaliniMalini (b.1946) is perhaps one of the most outspoken feminist artists of India. With Malani, the autobiographical, the psychological and the political find references in the everyday urban reality. Her convictions are deeply informed by her intellectual experience during her stay in Paris in 1970s where she was in a certain close proximity with the stimulating cross-section of thinkers, writers and artists. The highly charged period of the May 1968 student's revolt instigated intellectual restlessness and vigorous self-questioning for Malani, which kept surfacing in her works. Her 1980s works like *Old Arguments about Indigenism, Of Monsters and Angels*, and *Flux of Experience*, engage with the urgent questions of globalization, nationalism, and the Third World poverty. Besides her sustained engagement with the contemporary socio-political concerns she too shares her committed adherence to her mentor, such as Subramanyan, and like Meera Mukherjee and Nilima Sheikh, ventures to smudge the gap between traditional art practice and the avant-garde.

Malani is known for organizing the first exhibition of female Indian artists in the country in 1985. Besides the eclectic nature and prolific dynamism of her own work she is equally known as one of India's foremost advocates for women in the arts. As she once said in an interview: "My own art was from the start female-oriented." Malani is known for her in-depth exploration of feminine narratives, which started off as an autobiographic intervention into the subjective world of diaries and then moved on to more rigorous engagement with the imagery of Indian and Greek mythology. Her prime aim has been, as Alina Cohen remarks, to make women visible outside the narratives of "femininity".

"Her work often speculates the gestures and voices of women who have been silenced, particularly by 'great' works of literature, such as Sita from the Ramayana, whom she places alongside the Greeks Cassandra and Medea..."¹⁵

ArpanaCaur's (b. 1954) feminist viewpoint remains to be the most conspicuously articulate as compared to other women artists of India. She eloquently contested the universal male chauvinistic identity of the art by sharing her personal self in the creation of a female protagonist. Caur adopted and preferred the strong feminine figures of Basohli and reinterpreted them by somewhat de-eroticizing the *nayika* in order to protect their feminine force from the male gaze. On the other hand with the expanding proportions of her female figures, the male figure is considerably shrinking and diminishing. Besides her politically charged feminist concerns, Caur engages with the variety of concerns like the existential themes of alienation and claustrophobia, bhakti, and the political violence. For having had difficult early years and a passionate empathy for social concerns, her work mediates across the autobiographical, the communal, and the humanitarian.

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