# CHANGING ROLES AND REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN MODERN INDIAN ART: BREAKING STEREOTYPES

**Dr. Prachi Priyanka**
*Assistant Professor, School of Languages & Culture, Sharda University, Greater Noida, UP*
*prachi.priyanka@sharda.ac.in, prachi.writes@gmail.com*

"A work of art is the trace of a magnificent struggle." – Grace Hartigan

**Abstract:** The relationship between women and art has been a complex and fascinating journey. Women have always been a natural choice for artists across the world, mainly because of the dimensions that one can portray while duplicating her on canvas or on a pedestal. Being a gender that is physically tender and emotionally stronger, just opposite to that of the male counterparts, it may have been challenging for an artist to represent the beauty of a woman as he balances the representation of her strength and weaknesses through the skills of his art.

The women of India have been entangled in a constant struggle against stigmatisation and persecution by society for centuries. There have been countless attempts to spread awareness about, and ultimately bring to an end, the charge of horrific gender-biased crimes perpetuated in the name of a misguided notion of 'culture' and 'tradition'. Art has been one of the most widely used mediums for expressing the plight of women in India. To analyze the representation of women within power and gender relations in a patriarchal society, we need to consider the role of agency in women's lives. There is a fundamental transformation in the position of women in modern India with the various reform movements and a gradual change in the perception of women in society. The general purpose of this proposed study is to investigate the inter-relation of gender, women and art in Indian context. The study aims to explore how the sensual, exotic, depraved, distorted and divine representations of women and their bodies have formed an integral part of visual art from the colonial era to the modern times. It also aims to unravel how the ideas of desirable and undesirable femininity are communicated in a patriarchal set up – and how women artists strive to break those stereotypes in an effort to paint women as they see themselves, not as projected idealized versions of womanhood that dictate how they 'ought to be'.

**Keywords:** Women, Empowerment, Visual Arts, Stereotypes, Women Artists.

**Introduction:** Visual culture permeates women's everyday lives, affecting how they see themselves, the world, and their relationships with others. From television to the internet, shopping centers to art galleries; we come across women in commercials selling dominant ideologies. Kerry Fredman (2003) noted "Individuals appropriate characteristics of visual representation, adopting these representations as a description of himself/ herself. From this perspective, people can be manipulated through images that are often antithetical to their individual natures" (p. 2). It does not mean that women do not have agency or ability to critically interpret, examine and reshape the existing visual culture. But, as Gaudelius points out, women are still in a vulnerable position to reject and reshape established systems of meaning defined by patriarchy and delivered by visual images. She stressed that women were historically deprived of "social positions" and access to dominant systems of meanings, and therefore had no control over the ways in which these meanings are constructed and use them". Feminist scholars have also noted that in traditional fine arts and contemporary culture, women are often portrayed as sex objects, inferior to men, and their creative works are frequently excluded from mainstream art.

The character of Indian art is best described as plastic, organic and sculptural. This is well symbolized by the nature of Indian architecture-primarily a sculptural mass rather than a space enclosure. The "dominance" of the sculptural mode in India is due to the Indian propensity, stronger than that of any other culture, for carving sculptural caves and temples out of the living rock, of mountain escarpment or

outcropping. Also in ancient India, the arts were not separated as they unfortunately are today the architect; the sculptor and the painter were often one man. Sculptures were invariably painted in colour and the sculpture generally was not free-standing, but formed part of the temple structure. In this way architecture, sculpture and painting were in fact, much more intimately connected than they are today and much of this was a happy combination.

Indian art was inspired by religion, for India is the birth place of three of the world's great religions Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism and these three faiths have inspired most of our Indian art. We use the word 'most' purposely for the simple reason that not all Indian art is religious. The Indian artist was a man of this universe, he lived here, looked around himself, saw the joys and sorrows of the life and reproduced them in whatever medium he happened to be working in at a given time; clay, wood, paper, metal or stone. The creation of art by the Indian artists are not "realistic" representations in the sense we understand the term on Greek or Roman Art (but they are imagined and are idealised).

None had actually seen the major gods like Rama, Krishna, Vishnu and Shiva, etc., but according to their description in the scriptures the Indian artists visualised them as shown generally standing erect, signifying mental, physical and spiritual equilibrium. In form, the males are virile beings broad shouldered, deep chested and narrow hipped. The females are precisely contrary to the males narrow shouldered, having full and fir breasts, and attenuated waist and' broad hips. The females according to the Indian artists represent Matri or the mother. Indian art is a treasure house of ancient contemporary life, its faiths and beliefs, customs and manners. It is considered by some to be the function or purpose of art of any age to mirror contemporary society, its customs, manners, habits, modes of dress and ornamentation etc.

The depiction of female figures in ancient times focused on their divine aspect and related them with mythology and spirituality. With the invasion of Muslims, art in India was restricted to depicting court scenes as subject matter. The art of portraiture received special attention during Mughal rule. However, it was only in the reign of Jahangir that female figure became popular subject in art. It was probably due to the powerful influence of Nur Jahan. After the downfall of Mughal empire, the artists who had been trained in Persian art now turned towards Rajasthani miniature – the highlights of the art being strong lines, bold colors and utmost care to minute details. The subject matter of those miniature paintings was the daily life, hunting scenes, and depiction of Radha Krishna in various moods.

Throughout the centuries, women have been involved in making art, whether as creators and innovators of new forms of artistic expression, patrons, collectors, sources of inspiration, or significant contributors as art historians and critics. Women have been and continue to be integral to the institution of art, but despite being engaged with the art world in every way, many women artists have found opposition in the traditional narrative of art history. They have faced challenges due to gender biases, from finding difficulty in training to selling their work and gaining recognition. It is therefore, important for us to understand how have women been represented, under-represented or mis-represented in art history.

Tyler Cowen in 'Why women success and fail, in the Arts' puts forward four Hypotheses to account for the observed differences between male and female artists. According to the Genetic hypotheses, men and women have differing abilities at an innate biological level. According to this, men are on average smarter, more artistically gifted, or more driven for reasons that are genetically and intrinsic to their maleness. The second hypotheses is Discrimination hypotheses, which claims women have no less artistic potential than men, but women have not been able to develop their skills fully due to inferior training or negative self image or lack of market-driven skills.

For centuries, women were systematically excluded from the records of art history. This was due to a number of factors: art forms like textiles and what we call the "decorative arts" were often dismissed as craft and not "fine art"; many women were kept from pursuing a general education, let alone arts training; and finally the men who dominated the discipline both in practice and history often believed women to be inferior artists. As artist and instructor Hans Hoffmann once said in a "compliment" to the

influential abstract expressionist painter Lee Krasner in the mid-20th century: "This is so good you wouldn't know it was done by a woman."
Anjali Purohit, an artist based in Mumbai, observes "Men are seen as professional from the moment they start working as artists. Women have to prove their credentials, because they're seen to have other competing priorities – children, the family." While women are depicted in terms of their gendered identity, there is no such depiction of men as fathers, husbands or male prostitutes – rather their social `and economic standing are used as markers.

The third hypothesis is called the Maternal Obstacles hypothesis which claims that though women are no less skilled than men, however, they do not achieve artistic success because of reasons which are innate to the female sex, child bearing being one of the obvious culprit.

The sculptor Ursula Meyer is of the view that being an artist and being female are irreconcilable – "The male cultural bias has largely stunted the development of female artists. Women have been trained to think that they are not entitled to develop their own professional talents but that their main function is to be supportive to men. The prolonged process of cultural brainwashing has conditioned women to submissively and graciously give up what makes man's life worth living; his self determination and autonomy, his freedom from trivial chores, and his access to any chosen profession.

The fourth hypothesis, Parity hypotheses, claims that women artists have in no way been less impressive or accomplished than their male counterparts.

The low visibility of women often raises this old and tricky question – why haven't female artists caught up with the men when it comes to pricing? In broader realm of art, there seems to be two levels at which women participated and were accorded respect. The works of women like the sculptor Hemi Bawa and the photographer Dayanita Singh drew as much attention as the works of men like Jitesh Kallat or Subodh Gupta. And the Indian art world has now evolved into a hospitable environment for women in other roles – as gallery owners, art fund managers, curators and auction house managers. However, this was not the scene during the 1940s. Back then, there was very little room for female artists. Amrita Shergil was one of the few of that era to make her mark, but the advance of modernists in India was dominated by men for the next few decades. It was around 1970s that the floodgates opened for female artists.

Sahifa Banu's painting *The Lady Paints a Self-Portrait while Her Attendant Faces Her Holding a Mirror* leads us to believe that art lessons were common in harems. Sahifa Banu was a princess in the court of Jehangir and the only woman artist to gain fame in the Mughal era.

Ravi Varma is one of the most important painters of the Colonial India and his depiction of women gave new visual language to Indian art. Born into an aristocratic family of Kerala; he taught himself the intricacies of oil painting and the practices of European naturalism. His colour palette has become the source for innumerable representations of Indian gods and goddesses, from the popular calendar art to the comic books of Amar Chitra Katha. Daubed in bright, dazzling colours, his paintings of goddesses, draped in Maheshwari and Paithani saris, evoked a kind of femininity that in popular representations henceforth came to define 'Indianness'.

However, painters like Arpana Caur finds the representation of women in Varma's art to be stereotypical images distant from real life. She says, "I have never liked the representation of women by Varma. It is too calendar-like. Women in his works are much like the ornaments they wear. They are either idealized or turned into objects of desire with their clinging wet saris. These are not down-to-earth women who work like you and me."

A balanced appraisal of Varma's representation of women comes from Gogi Saroj Pal, a painter who has constantly worked on the image of women: "Varma painted a certain class and mostly commissioned works. He belonged to another era and two World Wars separate him from us. We make statements. He

did not. But he was a skilled craftsman and his eye for detail of the Indian skin, textiles and jewelry is exceptional."
It is important and enriching study of how stereotypes are broken when Nalini Malini, a Bombay based painter, re-worked on Raja Ravi Varma's allegorical painting 'Galaxy of Musicians' 'showing eleven female musicians dressed in the different costumes of India: signifying unity in diversity. Malini's video contrasts this with later histories of the rise of fascism and the genocide in Gujarat in 2002. What starts off as a visual fairytale, where all parts of the nation play in harmony together, ends up in a bloodbath.

Talking of representation of women during freedom struggle, Abanindranath Tagore's depiction of nationalistic fervor through the painting of Bharatmata is noteworthy."The woman as the Nation", a very revolutionary depiction which was mainly conceived keeping in mind the Swadeshi movement and the patriotic fervor of that time.The painting made in water colours depicts the Bharat Mata as a four-armed Hindu goddess as the central figure in the painting. She is depicted in delicate tints of saffron, pale green and luminous white. The facial features are very Indian with fair complexion and a golden body. The entire rendering is very symbolic yet quite real. She is wearing a saffron colored robe, and in her four arms she holds food( anna), clothing( vastra), a manuscript for education(siksha) and beads of salvation (disksha) instead of weapons as the earlier images of Hindu Goddesses. The impact of this painting was that Bharatmata became the new deity of the country and was used as a mobilizing artifact during all the Quit-India processions. This image became the face of new Swadeshi India, the free and the Independent India, in which the Bharat Mata, the motherland was not in chains or shackles but radiant and promising a bright future to its people.

Another Bengali artist, Jamini Roy, is counted among the early modernists of twentieth century Indian art, created a masterpiece when he painted three almond-eyed priestesses for his work named Three Pujarins. Inspired by the folk art tradition of Bengal, Roy experimented with vibrant colours and developed his own individual style of painting that resulted in artwork that were a visual feast. His mission was to capture the simplicity embodied in folk life; to make art available to a wider cross-section of people; and to provide Indian art with its own identity. Roy discarded European paints choosing mineral and vegetable based pigments. Painting ordinary men and women and reformulating popular images, he restricted his palette to seven earthy colors; red, yellow ochre, cadmium green, vermillion, grey, blue and white.

Women for ages have attracted the artists with their beauty and form. Portrayed in various ways, most of the depictions of women had placed them as objects for the gratification of men. Until some of the artists, of whom most were women, started projecting themselves and other women in a different way by the middle of the 20$^{th}$ century. Nudity, which was earlier seen as a part of the art practice and only seen from the perspective of men in terms of the beautiful, sensuous female body, started getting a different perspective as it moved beyond just the body or the watcher's object and came out as a powerful aspect of woman's strength. As against earlier paintings where these women rarely looked into the viewer's eyes, now the women confronted the observer with a contact of eyes. This is evident in the paintings of Amrita Sher-gil. Like her Mexican peer Frida Kahlo, with whom she shares Hungarian heritage, Sher-Gil was a rebellious and adventurous spirit who broke barriers in art and life. 'The self in making' examines Amrita Sher-Gil's self-portraits that were grounded in her self-consciousness of growing up to be an artist and also positioning herself as a modern woman. Her nuanced persona could easily slip from a western outfit into a traditional brocaded sari or masquerade the bohemian and get into roles other than the domestic. She drew a series of self-portraits in pencil when she was barely 14, learning the skills to transcribe, transform and transmit varied moods and moments through it. In art historian Rakhee Balaram's words, "The self-portraits display the artist moving from girl to woman to artist as she explored a sensuality that ranges from the heavy-handed to the subtle. Sher-Gil casts herself in a serious light in her *Self-Portrait with Easel* (1930), moving deliberately from the domestic and the intimate context of the nineteenth-century woman artist to the monumental and majestic poses recalling those of Rembrandt and later Van Gogh."

Balaram further adds, "At stake was not only a serious and viable artistic career as a woman, but the

development of a subjectivity that was being defined through the self-portrait. Conscious of being both muse and maker, Sher-Gil took on the position of artist and object with a double consciousness of being both." The nudity or nakedness was not only dealt with more confidence and conviction; it was often not the body but the mind which occupied the central place in interpreting the work of art. This suggested the artistic development in favor of the women lending them an empowerment. Saptam Patel writes:
"The main cause behind this enablement could also be attributed to the feminism which was holding a stronger and stronger footing in the society then. At one point of time, this female body was relished, then it was taken for granted, and then a time came when the female body was celebrated."

If Amrita Shergil found a new way of seeing and expressing after her encounter with Ajanta murals, Meera found her true calling when she saw the folk art of Bastar metal casting and Dhokra. These crafts use the lost wax casting method and Meera spent years living in the village, observing, learning and practicing this traditional folk art. represents the blend of the ordinary life and the timelessness of a traditional art. While other artisans of Bastar stuck to depiction of celebration, and tribal rituals through their work, Meera chose to depict the seemingly ordinary everyday tasks which form the backbone of any household. Household activities like separating grain from chaff and everyday activities like fishing had never been thought of as important enough to be depicted before. Meera's sculptures are big and life-size and they command attention, seeking to ignite a debate over the significance of ordinary things and tasks

Her native paintings are unlabored and comment on the 'space' of women and the girl child in the society, and the growing violence and social injustice. Exploration without a fixed destination can be said to be a motivation for her art. So vague is the destination at the starting point that Singh says she has never consciously set out to make a middle-aged woman—a figure that occurs often in her works. The woman, she says, emerges as a form, as a table or a chair might, from her brush. What drives Singh is the urge to put a mark on blank paper. From there, she abandons herself to where the lines, the electrocardiogram-like zig-zags and the smudges, might take her.

Gayatri Sinha aptly remarks: "Arpita Singh has pushed the visual lexicon of the middle-aged woman further than almost any other woman artist. The anomaly between the aging body and the residue of desire, between the ordinary and the divine and the threat of the violent fluxes of the impinging external world gives her work its piquancy and edge. At the same time she critiques the miasma of urban Indian life with suggestive symbols of violence that impinge on the sphere of the private, creating an edgy uncertainty."

Over a journey that spans five decades and has taken her across the globe, Anjolie Ela Menon's art has incorporated the resonances of diverse cultures. She enhanced the finely textured surface of her paintings by burnishing the finished work with a soft dry brush, creating a glow reminiscent of medieval icons. Menon utilized the characteristics of early Christian art – including the frontal perspective, the averted head, and the slight body elongation – but took the female nude as a frequent subject. The result is a dynamic relationship of the erotic and the melancholy.

Mrinalini Mukherjee's is another unique voice in contemporary Indian art. The sculptures knotted painstakingly with hemp ropes in earthy or rich glowing colours evoke a fecund world of burgeoning life, lush vegetation, iconic figures. The strong note of sexuality is manifest in the phallic forms, the mysterious folds and orifices, the intricate curves and drapes. There is a sensuous, tactile quality to her work which exercises a compelling hold on the viewer.

Women have always been artists, and there always have been glimpses of women's art within male-driven societies. However, beginning in the 20th century, things began to change not only for women artists, but for women across the domestic and public spheres. A new women's movement, with an emphasis on the advocacy of equal rights, organisations devoted to women's interests, and a new generation of female professionals and artists transformed the traditionally male-driving social structure

around the world. These social shifts, which began to emerge at the beginning of the century, developed further with the advent of World War I and expanding global unrest, propelling more women into the workforce and exposing them to social, professional, and political situations that had previously been limited to men.

In a multiplicity of media, techniques and means of artistic expression, we see how artists like Seema Kohli and Sharmi Chowdhury enact the complexities of human relationships through significantly different practices. Kohli often utlises mythology as her subject to create visuals that bring issues of faith, belief and gender into a dialogue with each other – often using the female figure in her artworks almost as though she herself had become an integral part of the final product. The multiplicity of techniques matches and furthers the polytheism of beliefs that is present in her art – representative of the various beliefs that a person, particularly a woman, can hold within herself. In "In Silence the Secrets Speak", this recurring iconography includes a number of tongues of different shapes and sizes that appear across her sculptural installations *Khel*, *Devi* and *Yogini*. The use of the tongue is an interesting metaphor, given the range of meanings it communicates – from dialects and dialogue to language and beliefs.

Similarly, in Sharmi Chowdhary's works we find how the artist's interest in the frailties and complexities of human relationships is evident in her paintings and sculptures as she seeks truth – both as an artist and as a human being. While it is not evident whether the artist herself is appearing in her work, many of her paintings depict an ethereal, feminine figure dressed in white with a somber, soul-searching expression on her countenance as though she is also searching for answers.

By calling attention to identity, sexuality, politics, and history, women artists have dominated the art debates for the last several decades. But how do we go about talking about the women who art history forgot? Should we have books and museums dedicated solely to women artists? Is it true that the traditional art historical canons have already done harm by giving the cultural production by women a peripheral importance? Might labeling "women artists" unwittingly establish misleading links between gender, biography and creative output? Groups like the Guerrilla Girls, a collective of women artists and art professionals, work to fight discrimination and raise awareness of the issues that women face in the art world. They do this through staging interventions and protests, wearing gorilla masks to take the focus away from their identities. They reframe the question "Why haven't there been more great women artists in Western history?" asking instead "Why haven't more women been considered great artists throughout Western history?" The project of seeking out women artists excluded from the canon has also encouraged a redefinition of art practices themselves, inviting us to rethink what we call the "decorative arts," installation art, and performance art revolving around artists' bodies.

**References:**


1. Lai, Alice. 'Images of Women in Visual Culture' in Art Education. Vol. 62. No. 1 (Jan. 2009). Pp 14-19.
2. Cowen Tyler. 'Why Women Succeed, and Fail, in the Arts. Journal of Cultural Economics. Vol. 20. No. 2. (1996) pp 93 – 113.
3. https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-history-basics/tools-understanding-art/a/a-brief-history-of-women-in-art
4. http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/63176/12/12_chapter%204.pdf
5. http://www.ijelr.in/2.2.15/91-99%20SAPTAM%20PATEL.pdf
6. http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/80281/12/12_chapter%205.pdf
7. http://www.boloji.com/articles/10245/women-in-raja-ravi-varma-mold
8. http://www.business-standard.com/article/opinion/lunch-with-bs-arpana-caur-115102300818_1.html
9. https://vimeo.com/53325532
10. http://artradarjournal.com/2018/02/23/feminine-subjectivities-2-indian-women-artists-in-chennai-india/


***