

PROJECTION OF NEW TRENDS IN INDIAN CONTEMPORARAY ART BY WOMEN ARTISTS

1

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Though it may seem to be a simplistic statement to define trends and conceptual content in contemporary Indian art but one's attention is always drawn to the fact that art is a mirror of life and life is a potpourri of our beliefs, thoughts, feelings, customs and traditions, cultural and social ethos, myths- aspirations and fears, hopes and desires and struggles, triumphs and failures. Since time immemorial '*Life imitates Art and far from that Art imitates Life*' these words of wisdom truly capture the essence of content and concepts as explained by the great author and philosopher Oscar Wilde consciously or subconsciously. Human beings have been nurturing the urge to explore their inner vision and creative impulses through sustained contemplation and perception involving the subconscious or conscious thought processes and experiencing the presence of the state of supreme consciousness which gives impetus to the formation of an imagery based on their surroundings, observations and experiences.¹ In the Indian context, *Kala* or art has been described as the true form of expression of emotions- physical as well as metaphysical employing various modes, techniques and styles to capture the very essence of an idea of self-realization using metaphors as objects and elements which predominantly surround them in nature thereby in a way imitating the 'Supreme Creator' of this universe in their own individualistic capabilities, fascinations and preferences. Art is an integral part of life and human development. In the true sense of the word, in fact, Art sans social concerns and psychological relevance is soulless.

The whole world is turning into a global village and is being transformed everyday by breathing in the fresh ideas and trends, styles and metaphors, technical skills and new modes of expression and interpretations propagated by artists and critics from the far-flung corners of this globe. This new insight is influencing our own contemporary art and Indian artists are gladly accepting the new trends being brought to them via technical advancements and web revolution in the west. A new dimension heavily loaded with commerce and saleability of artworks is also emerging as scores of avenues and markets open via art *melas*, art festivals and art *mandis*

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or art marts where artists are exposed to commercial and global aspects such as auctions and sales worldwide. This trend is quite disturbing in the sense that a majority of artists have chosen to be in this rat race which is based on demand and supply where the casualty is the creativity and ethos and essence of our own creative traditions and manifestations. Unfortunately, everything which comes from the west is considered valuable and ultimate.

But deep in our psyche we always have a special place for the social causes and concerns being portrayed in Indian contemporary art and Indian artists being sensitive and party to the issues which surround them in daily life find it convenient and expressive to portray these issues concerning their lives in the contemporary works and there is a whole new generation of artists of various denominations who have deftly and exquisitely depicted these sentiments in their masterpieces. The canvas of the Indian contemporary art is varied and large but there is a vast majority of artists who have taken upon themselves to stand and speak for the concerns and manifestations of women in our society call them artists or art activists they have a glorious presence in Indian contemporary art. These bright and brave women artists have carved out a niche for themselves and taken the contemporary world of art by storm. Perhaps the seeds of this sensitivity were sown by the great soul Amrita Shergil way back in early 1930s who was instrumental in revolutionising the very concept of art and has influenced our vision to a great extent by opening windows and doors of our mental enclosures. She gave us a sight and insight and provided a vision to look at the world of Indian women which was a stereotyped and static in the minds of our society. Thanks to her a new brigade of women artists emerged on the scene of Indian contemporary art and enriched it in content and trends.

Today the works of art by the women painters are realistic visual manifestations revealing the other side of the coin in terms of prevailing realities relating to a plethora of physical, philosophical, socio-economic, moral, psychological strengths and strains which surround the very being of a woman. Thus the role and contribution of contemporary women painters in India who share the concerns of women's aspirations, hopes and desires have emerged as torch-bearers in a crusade against social and moral injustices, prejudices and biases through their sensitive portrayal of present day tumultuous scenario.

While looking at the works of women artists, it is amply clear that any change good or bad, affects them the most and they have an uncanny sense of transferring their pains and joys into their works of art, songs and writings, with a

rare sensitivity and introspection. A mere glimpse at the tribal and folk paintings of various regions in India, will reflect that it is the woman who carry forward the traditions, customs and social concerns of a particular region in their own innocent yet true to life scribblings and motifs.

To sum up the essence of this truthful submission, I wish to quote the words of great woman artist- Anupam Sud and I quote, *"I paint the female body as I am most familiar with it. It is my territory. It isn't glamorous for me as it is for men. For women, it's a source of existence and pain. Men can't understand the fear associated with the body. For them, night can be beautiful. For a woman, it is scary if she is alone and somebody approaches her in the darkness-what is looming out there? She feels insecure."*² (Fig.1)

Mother, daughter, sister, friend, *saheli*, *navika*, lover, crone, goddess, the woman artist recognizes these separate incarnations of herself. She is neither voyeur nor interlocutor but in some way always the protagonist of her own creations. Though in a lighter vein 'Patricia Uberoi', famous writer and sociologist has nailed the pseudo concerns of our society which is fully governed by male oriented mentalities, concerns and expressions. She writes that *"I set myself on a little exercise on Independence Day this year- to see how our dailies represented women's issues in the social and political agenda of the state. I more or less drew a blank. Excepting a full page advertisement on behalf of the department of women and child development, which paid fulsome tribute to the Constitution-makers 'for empowering the Nation to empower our women', I found the government ignored women's issues almost completely. I chanced upon an ad published in a prominent newspaper on women's day which had a screaming by line" years after Mother India became free" the caption reads liberation finds a completely new expression..., bringing into the lives of Indian housewives. This new found freedom for women turned out to be a washing machine ad."*³ This funny and ridiculous by-line of the advertisement clearly smacks off the inherent male-dominated conception that women's liberty and facility is merely limited to lessening her slavery ridden daily chores and establishes her as a bounded labourer who must toil hard in the kitchen and elsewhere without having the courage to complain.

Amrita Shergil created moving pictures oozing with deep sensitivity and a strong yearning for true liberation. She addressed the condition of frail rustic girls and ladies in pensive moods, (Fig.2) besides daring to create some of her own nudes in realistic European style.⁴

Exploring sensitive issues like modesty and femininity can be as complex as intriguing. But for someone as Gogi Saroj Pal, who considers art as her religion, adding a touch of reality to feminism with the stroke of a brush is just a way of life. Described as the first feminist woman painter of modern Indian art, Gogi Saroj Pal has consistently explored the condition and lives of women through her paintings. Taking up issues of gender prejudice in inimitable style, she flawlessly breathes life into her figures using painting brushes and a rich palette. In her paintings, Gogi Saroj Pal explores a vast reservoir of India's myths, fables and folklore. But she was not content with *Ganesh*, *Durga*, *Mahisasurmardini* and the like. She was among the first to recover significant mythical figures and forms, prominently the '*Kinnari*' (female version of the centaur) (Fig.3), '*Kamdhenu*' (half-woman, half-cow) (Fig.4), '*Hathyogini Kali*' and '*Hathyogini Shakti*'. Another subject that fascinates Gogi Saroj Pal is the '*Nayika-bhed*' or '*Heroine*'. Her *nayikas* are shamelessly nude, rejoicing in their nakedness and sexuality, reveling in the full sensuality of their curvaceous bodies. Some of her *nayikas* are hybrids: bird-woman, cow-woman, horse-woman, while others are fully human nudes- unclothed, sensual and immodest.⁵

Similarly anguish, protest, disturbance and an unabashed figuration in respect to the female body define the work of artist Navjot Altaf. The strong presence her figures exude is never diminished by sentimentality or the idealization of the female condition. The versatility and courage of this artist are made manifest in the most candid and explicit portrayals of the female nude. Her polychromatic nude sculptures address sexuality and fecundity with the vigour and truth of prehistoric art (Fig.5). Navjot Altaf does not shrink from addressing the most basic functions of the female body. She portrays woman as 'Earth-Mother', as 'Mother Goddess', symbol of fertility, implicit with sexuality and the possibility of violence and in so doing achieves a stark monumentality.⁶

Kanchan Chander, renowned painter and print maker in her recent series titled 'Passion and Possession' with a liberal use of objects, coins, keys and locks, reflect some of the disturbing experiences of women in a patriarchal society, (Fig.6) while at the same time describe her journey both as a woman and as an artist.⁷ Arpita Singh has packed her pictorial scenes with people and things; there are dots and other patterns, flags, bouquets and baskets of flowers, birds and ducks and the girl-child's playthings. There are guns, cars, aeroplanes and portrait heads and busts. Her obsession of repeating motifs may have some significance for her. Perhaps they hold for her different meanings at different times.⁸ (Fig.7)

The most evocative amongst the women artists is well known artist Anjolie Ela Menon, who through her works of young girls and women with blank eyes and mute expressions on their faces has uncovered the undercurrents of inherent abhorrence of a female child in our society peeping from behind the half shut doors and windows in search of openings and flights (Fig.8). Women trapped in situations not of their own making and the lurking fears and shadows of gloom where her mind and body are venerable are depicted with poetic expressions. Artist Arpana Caur of New Delhi has narrated the pangs of being a girl in her own inimitable style juxtaposing symbols of needles, threads, scissors, embroideries, stars and *gotta tilla* in awe-aspiring works which speak volumes of the drudgery and plight of a Girl child and a woman. Some remarkable works on the 'Widows of Vrindavan' (Fig.9) and 'Riot-affected women of Delhi', have derives an overwhelming compassion and sympathies. Her works are extraordinary in the sense that they are loaded with sensitive imagery and a very contemporary vocabulary which easily bonds with a viewer.

More recently Bharti Kher, eminent contemporary artist, who has carved a niche for herself in the International Art scene has discovered her roots through the humble cosmetic circular object called '*Bindi*' which is struck on the forehead of an Indian woman. Yet this tiny red circle denotes the power of a woman underlining the concept of *Shakti* and fertility. Demystifying the use of *Bindi*, she narrates that "*My Bindi fascination began when I saw a woman wearing a sperm shaped one- the irony of an uber male symbol adorning an uber feminine accessory struck her forcefully. I play with its form and content to create different layers of meaning. The bindi is not just a traditional symbol; it's the third eye with which a woman sees the world.*"⁹ Her large paintings have hundreds of *Bindis* which truthfully project the inner strengths and turmoils associated of being a woman, which go through the rigours of human evolution and germination of cultural, religious and social ethos (Fig.10). It is a happy sign indeed that at last a woman has started treating herself as a person and has begun to analyze the mysteries and mysticism associated with her through the age old prejudices and clichés. She is finding her voice and vision and is consolidating on her intensely personal and genuine vibrations which are finding a resounding resonance in her works of art and literature.

Artist Vasudha Thozhur's 'Untouchable' (Fig.11) recalls the Hindu practice of Sati, in which a widow commits suicide on her husband's pyre. In her transgressive treatment of this patriarchal horror, Thozhur paints herself seated defiantly on a burning pile of wood, inviolable and untouched by the flames. The promising names

who are engaged in telling the story of a woman through their canvases are a brave breed and they include Sheba Chhachhi, Anju Dodiya, Nalini Malini, Shukla Samant, Nilima Sheikh, Anita Dube, Shilpa Gupta, Rekha Rodwittiya, Rini Dhumal, Vasundhara Tiwari, Jaya Ganguli, Jayashree Chakravarty, Rummana Hussain, Mithu Sen and so on.

The artworks created by these talented women painters have to some extent enlarged the scope of vision and trends amongst the male artists also. Now they are equally aware and sensitive to the issues around them in the society and the daily encounters with a chaotic urban lifestyle and expansion of urbanization which is engulfing the cultural as well as social and economic milieu of our nation. Today the main hallmark of contemporary Indian art is the portrayal of onslaught on personal and collective consciousness on the human values, fading wisdoms and civilizations which are being overwhelmed with the rising violent scenario and mindless urbanization. The trend of depicting these challenges being faced by the modern men and women find their voice in works of art or art objects by using a medley of styles and techniques by employing technologies in installations, videography, photography, architecture and new-media objects. Though artists are using technology at the drop of a hat blindly imitating the west yet the essence of contemporary Indian art is deep rooted in our existence and civilizational inheritance. There is no harm in exploration, experimentation and improvisation but the ever-lasting and timeless works are those which stand the test of time and are beyond the boundaries of mere trends and stylization. Choice of trends is very personal and is neither the end nor the beginning of a great work of art.

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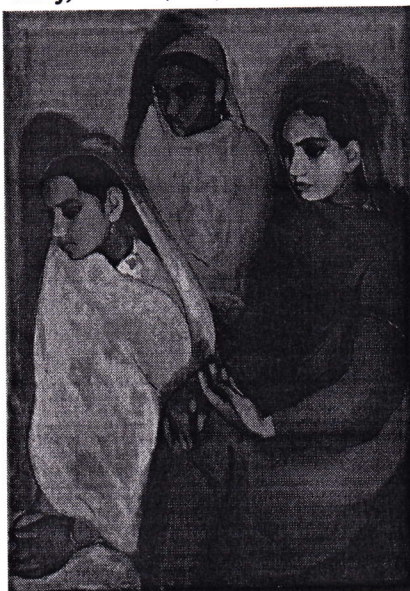


Fig.1

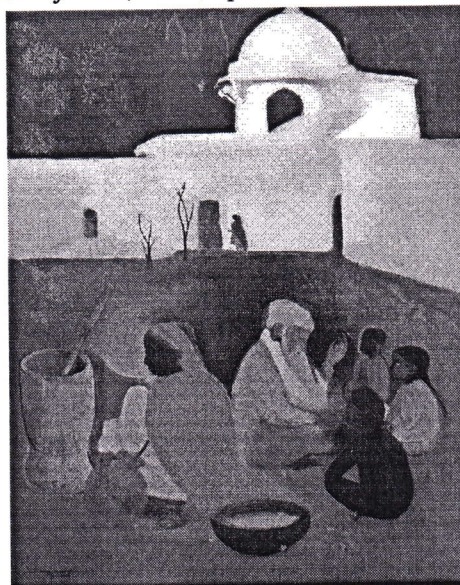


Fig.2



Fig.3

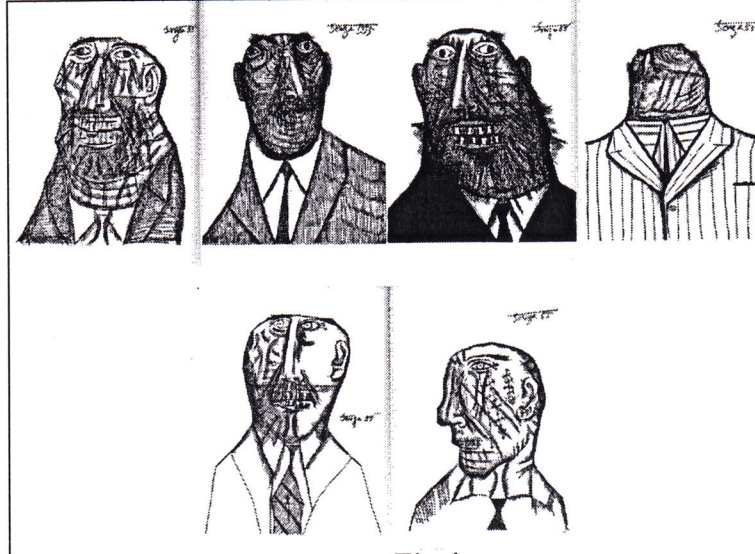


Fig.4

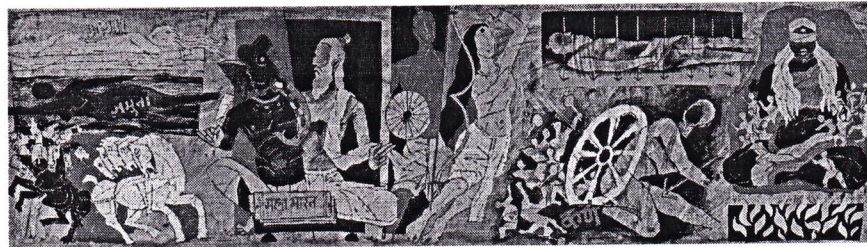


Fig.5

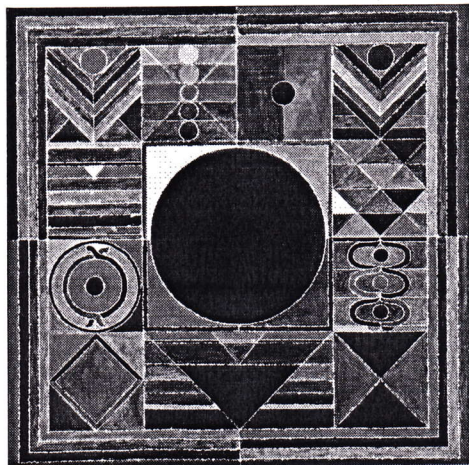


Fig.6



Fig.7

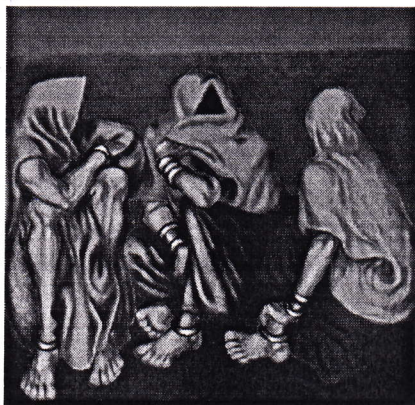


Fig.8



Fig.9



Fig.10



Fig.11