

Material Experimentation and Feminist Outlook in the Artworks of Mrinalini Mukherjee

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Abstract

This research paper undertakes a critical examination of the interconnected dimensions of material experimentation and feminist outlook in the sculptural practice of Mrinalini Mukherjee, one of the most significant figures in contemporary Indian sculpture. Emerging during the post-independence era of Indian modernism—a period marked by the search for new artistic identities and the negotiation between indigenous traditions and global modernist influences—Mukherjee developed a distinct sculptural vocabulary that fundamentally redefined the possibilities of material engagement within the field of contemporary art. Her practice, spanning over four decades, transformed the artistic status of fiber, ceramics, bronze, and organic materials, challenging the entrenched hierarchies that historically privileged stone and metal over textile-based and craft-associated mediums.

Mukherjee's sculptural language is deeply rooted in sustained experimentation with unconventional materials, particularly hand-spun and hand-dyed hemp and jute. Through labor-intensive processes of knotting, twisting, braiding, and weaving, she created large-scale, volumetric forms that defy easy classification as either craft or fine art. The research situates

Mukherjee's oeuvre within broader frameworks of feminist art theory, postcolonial discourse, and materialist aesthetics. From a feminist perspective, her deliberate use of fiber—historically coded as feminine and associated with domestic labor—constitutes a significant intervention into patriarchal art-historical structures. Textile and fiber practices have long been relegated to the realm of “craft” and marginalized within institutional narratives of high art. By elevating these materials to the scale and conceptual depth of monumental sculpture, Mukherjee contested the binary oppositions that structure artistic value systems: art versus craft, masculine versus feminine, permanence versus ephemerality, and public monument versus private domesticity. Her practice aligns with feminist efforts to reclaim gendered labor and to challenge the invisibility of women's material contributions within cultural production.

The theoretical lens of materialist aesthetics further illuminates how Mukherjee's sculptures foreground the agency of matter itself. Her works do not treat material as a passive vehicle for form; rather, material becomes an active collaborator in the sculptural process. Ultimately, this research argues that Mukherjee's material choices cannot be understood merely as aesthetic or formal experimentation. They are deeply political gestures embedded within a larger critique of artistic hierarchy, gendered labor, and colonial modernity. Through her innovative engagement with fiber, ceramics, and bronze, Mukherjee constructed a sculptural vocabulary that is sensuous yet monumental, rooted yet experimental, local yet global. Her work articulates a feminist vision that affirms multiplicity, corporeality, and the transformative power of material practice.

Keywords

Mrinalini Mukherjee, Material experimentation, Feminist art practice, Fiber sculpture, Contemporary Indian sculpture, Craft and fine art discourse.



(Image Source: MM Foundation)

Introduction

The history of modern sculpture in India has frequently been framed within narratives of monumentality, nationalist symbolism, and the assimilation or adaptation of Western modernist paradigms into postcolonial contexts. In the decades following India's independence in 1947, artists grappled with the task of constructing a visual language that could simultaneously assert cultural specificity and participate in global modernism. Sculpture, in particular, became a powerful medium for articulating ideas of permanence, public memory, and national identity. Materials such as stone, marble, and bronze—long associated with durability, heroism, and institutional authority—dominated the field. Monumental statuary and figurative abstraction often served as vehicles through which artists negotiated modernist aesthetics and indigenous references.

Within this context, the sculptural practice of Mrinalini Mukherjee occupies a profoundly distinctive and transformative position. Rather than conforming to the dominant sculptural vocabulary of her time, Mukherjee redirected attention toward materials and processes that had historically been marginalized within fine art discourse. She chose hemp, jute, hand-dyed fibers, ceramics, and later bronze treated with a deliberately organic sensibility. Mukherjee's refusal to embrace conventional sculptural media such as carved stone or polished bronze marked a decisive departure from established artistic trajectories. Her early fiber works, created through labor-intensive processes of knotting and twisting, foregrounded tactility, texture, and bodily engagement. Unlike the cool, smooth surfaces often associated with modernist sculpture, her forms appeared porous, muscular, and alive. Her practice emerged during a period when the Baroda School of Art, where she trained, was fostering debates about narrative, identity, and cultural specificity in post-independence Indian art. Yet Mukherjee's sculptural language did not simply align with prevailing narrative figuration or overt political symbolism. Instead, she cultivated a vocabulary rooted in material exploration and embodied presence. Her forms are neither straightforward representations of the human body nor entirely abstract constructions. They inhabit an intermediate space—oscillating between vegetal growth and corporeal suggestion, between ritualistic evocation and contemporary experimentation.

The ambiguity of Mukherjee's sculptures is not accidental; it arises from her sustained engagement with questions of materiality, gender, and artistic hierarchy. By employing fiber—traditionally associated with domestic labor and women's craft practices—she intervened in a system that historically privileged certain materials over others. In the Western canon, sculpture achieved legitimacy through association with marble, bronze, and other "noble" materials. Textile and fiber practices were relegated to the decorative arts or dismissed as utilitarian. Within the Indian context, craft traditions were often valorized as heritage but rarely accorded the same critical status as modernist painting or sculpture.

Her fiber sculptures, often suspended or freestanding, occupy space with a commanding presence. They possess a density that belies their pliability, achieved through meticulous knotting and accumulation. The process of making is visible in every twist and tension, foregrounding labor as an integral aspect of the work's meaning. The conceptual core of Mukherjee's practice lies in the politics of material choice. Material, in her work, is never neutral. Hemp and jute carry associations of rural labor and vernacular craft; clay evokes traditions of pottery and ritual object-making; bronze invokes histories of public commemoration. By bringing these materials into contemporary gallery spaces, Mukherjee destabilizes established boundaries between art and craft, public and private, permanence and ephemerality. This research paper investigates two central and interconnected axes of Mukherjee's oeuvre: material experimentation and feminist outlook. The first axis examines

how her innovative use of fiber, ceramic, and bronze destabilizes sculptural conventions and redefines the concept of medium. Through detailed analysis of technique, scale, and form, the study explores how Mukherjee's sculptures challenge assumptions about durability, authorship, and artistic value. The second axis considers how her engagement with gendered materials, embodied forms, and craft traditions articulates a feminist critique of art historical and cultural hierarchies. Rather than producing overtly didactic feminist imagery, Mukherjee embeds feminist consciousness within the very structure of her material practice.

By examining these dimensions together, this paper argues that Mukherjee's sculptural language emerges from a deliberate and sustained politics of materiality. Moreover, Mukherjee's practice contributes to broader theoretical discussions in feminist materialism and postcolonial aesthetics. Feminist materialism emphasizes the agency of matter and the inseparability of body and environment. Mukherjee's sculptures, with their visible knots, tensions, and textures, foreground the active role of material in shaping meaning. They do not conceal the process; rather, they celebrate it. In doing so, they challenge the notion of the artist as a detached creator imposing form upon passive matter. Instead, the sculptures suggest a collaborative relationship between artist and material—one marked by negotiation and responsiveness. In conclusion, the introduction establishes the conceptual framework for understanding Mukherjee's work as a transformative intervention in both material practice and feminist discourse. Through radical experimentation and a sustained interrogation of artistic hierarchies, she redefined what sculpture could mean within post-independence India. Her forms—sensuous, ambiguous, and materially assertive—challenge viewers to reconsider assumptions about gender, craft, and monumentality. By foregrounding the politics embedded in material choice, this research situates Mukherjee not merely as an innovative sculptor but as a critical thinker whose work continues to expand the boundaries of artistic modernity.



(Image Source: MM Foundation)

Historical and Biographical Context

Born in 1949 in Bombay (now Mumbai), Mukherjee grew up in an intellectually and artistically vibrant environment. She was the daughter of two prominent artists: Benode Behari Mukherjee, a central figure of Santiniketan modernism, and Leela Mukherjee, a sculptor whose work engaged both modernist and craft sensibilities. This dual inheritance—painterly modernism and sculptural materiality—profoundly shaped her sensibility.

Mukherjee studied at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Maharaja Sayajirao University, Baroda, during a period when the Baroda School was cultivating critical debates around narrative figuration, cultural identity, and postcolonial aesthetics. Later, she attended the Royal College of Art in London, where she encountered global contemporary practices and experimental approaches to sculpture.

The 1970s, when Mukherjee began her fiber explorations, were also a time of emerging feminist discourse globally and within India. Artists were questioning patriarchal institutions, gendered labor divisions, and the exclusion of women's practices from canonical art history. Within this milieu, Mukherjee's turn toward fiber was both materially innovative and conceptually resonant.

Material Experimentation: Reconfiguring Sculptural Language

The sculptural practice of Mrinalini Mukherjee represents one of the most compelling reconfigurations of material language in post-independence Indian art. At a time when sculpture in India largely followed the conventions of carved stone, cast bronze, or welded metal abstraction, Mukherjee undertook a radical departure by centering her practice on fiber and later extending her exploration into ceramics and bronze. Through fiber, clay, and metal, she reimagined sculpture not as something carved from solidity or cast into permanence, but as something grown, knotted, accumulated, and organically formed.

Fiber as Sculptural Medium

Mukherjee's most radical and defining contribution lies in her transformation of fiber into monumental sculpture. Hemp and jute—materials commonly associated with rope-making, agricultural labor, shipping industries, and domestic crafts—became the foundational elements of her early practice in the 1970s and 1980s. In choosing these materials, Mukherjee consciously moved away from the traditional sculptural canon. Stone and bronze historically symbolized durability, authority, and artistic legitimacy. Fiber, by contrast, was regarded as pliable, perishable, and craft-bound. Her technical process was highly labor-intensive and physically demanding. She developed a distinctive method of hand-knotting, twisting, braiding, looping, and dyeing strands of hemp. Rather than weaving fiber into flat textiles, she constructed dense, three-dimensional structures. The repetitive act of knotting generated volumetric mass, allowing the sculptures to occupy space with a

commanding presence. Each knot became both a structural necessity and a visible trace of bodily labor. The resulting works, often suspended from ceilings or standing independently on the floor, possess a palpable tension and dynamic energy.

Unlike woven textiles that emphasize surface pattern and decorative rhythm, Mukherjee's knotted forms create dense, muscular, almost anatomical structures. They appear to pulse with internal vitality, resembling intertwined sinews, roots, vines, or torsos. Gravity plays a crucial role in shaping these sculptures; suspended works stretch downward, responding to weight and tension, while freestanding pieces push upward in organic growth. The viewer becomes acutely aware of material resistance and elasticity. Fiber resists rigidity, yet through accumulated knots and tensile balance, it achieves remarkable structural integrity.



(Image Source: MM Foundation)

The use of fiber operates simultaneously on multiple levels: Material Level: Fiber embodies flexibility and tensile strength. Unlike stone or metal, it cannot be carved or cast into predetermined shapes; it must be coaxed, looped, and built gradually. Its structural stability emerges through tension and accumulation rather than solidity.

Symbolic Level: Hemp and jute evoke associations with manual labor, domesticity, and traditionally feminine craft practices. By elevating these materials to monumental scale, Mukherjee subverted their marginal status and foregrounded the value of embodied labor.

Conceptual Level: Fiber disrupts the art historical hierarchy privileging stone and bronze. In redefining fiber as a legitimate sculptural medium, Mukherjee destabilized disciplinary boundaries between fine art and craft.

Monumentality and Softness

One of the most compelling paradoxes in Mukherjee's fiber works is the coexistence of softness and monumentality. Monumental sculpture has historically been associated with permanence, heroism, public commemoration, and masculine authority. Its materials—marble, granite, bronze—reinforce this association through hardness and durability.

Mukherjee's fiber forms, however, are monumental in scale yet fundamentally pliable. They occupy significant spatial presence without relying on rigid mass. This paradox destabilizes several binary oppositions deeply embedded in sculptural tradition:

- Hard versus Soft
- Masculine versus Feminine
- Monumental versus Intimate



(Image Source: MM Foundation)

The forms themselves frequently suggest cocoon-like enclosures, budding pods, or phallic-vegetal hybrids. Yet they resist explicit identification. Their ambiguity prevents reductive readings. They are neither explicitly masculine nor feminine, neither wholly abstract nor fully representational. This ambiguity becomes a site of interpretive openness, encouraging multiple readings rather than fixed meanings.

Ceramics and Organic Surface

In the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, Mukherjee expanded her material vocabulary by engaging with ceramics. Clay offered a different yet related mode of experimentation. While fiber emphasized tension and flexibility, clay enabled exploration of texture, surface, and mass. Importantly, ceramics also occupy a liminal position within art history—situated between craft tradition and sculptural practice.

Mukherjee's ceramic works are distinguished by their organic surfaces. Rather than producing smooth, polished vessels, she cultivated roughness and irregularity. Surfaces evoke bark, coral formations, crustacean shells, or human skin. This textural complexity reinforces the sense that her sculptures are living organisms rather than inert objects. The transition to ceramics does not represent a break from fiber; rather, it translates fiber sensibility into another medium. The emphasis on accumulation, textural richness, and

organic ambiguity persists. Clay, like fiber, carries associations with traditional craft—pottery, ritual objects, domestic vessels. By employing it in large-scale contemporary sculpture, Mukherjee further challenges the hierarchy separating fine art from artisanal production.

Feminist Outlook and Gendered Materiality

The sculptural practice of Mrinalini Mukherjee is deeply informed by questions of gender, material hierarchy, and embodied experience. Although she did not consistently frame her work within overtly activist rhetoric, her material choices and formal strategies articulate a powerful feminist consciousness. Her feminist outlook operates not through direct representation or didactic symbolism but through the structural logic of her materials and forms.

Reclaiming Craft Traditions

Textile and fiber practices have historically been relegated to the domestic sphere and coded as feminine. Across cultures, weaving, embroidery, knotting, and other fiber-based activities were associated with household labor and often dismissed as decorative or utilitarian rather than conceptual or monumental. In Western art history, these practices were systematically separated from “high art,” which privileged painting and sculpture executed in durable materials such as marble or bronze. Feminist art movements of the 1970s challenged this hierarchy by reclaiming craft traditions as valid and critical artistic practices.



(Image Source: MM Foundation)

Mukherjee’s fiber sculptures resonate with this reclamation, yet they operate within a specifically Indian cultural and historical context. India possesses a rich textile heritage, where weaving and dyeing are integral to social, economic, and ritual life. However, even within this tradition, textiles were often categorized as craft rather than fine art. By elevating knotting and weaving techniques to monumental scale, Mukherjee disrupted the entrenched art/craft binary. Her works are not decorative hangings or utilitarian objects; they are commanding sculptural presences that occupy gallery space with authority.

Embodiment and Organic Form

A defining feature of Mukherjee's work is its evocation of bodily presence without resorting to explicit figuration. Her sculptures frequently display curves, folds, cavities, and protrusions that suggest musculature, torsos, or vegetal anatomies. Yet they resist direct identification as male or female bodies. This indirect evocation is significant within feminist discourse, which has long critiqued the objectification of the female body in visual culture. Rather than presenting the female body as spectacle or passive object, Mukherjee constructs forms that embody growth, tension, and interiority. The emphasis is not on external appearance but on internal vitality. In this framework, the body becomes a process rather than image.

Decolonial Feminist Perspective

Mukherjee's feminist outlook cannot be fully understood through Western feminist paradigms alone. While her reclamation of fiber parallels global feminist art movements, her practice is deeply rooted in indigenous materials and non-Western cosmologies. Working in post-independence India, she navigated a cultural landscape shaped by colonial histories, nationalist aspirations, and global art exchanges.



(Image Source: MM Foundation)

Her engagement with hemp, jute, and clay situates her within a decolonial framework that re-centers local materials and traditions within contemporary discourse. Rather than imitating Western sculptural modernism, she forged a hybrid language that integrates vernacular techniques with experimental form. This negotiation between global and local identities is central to her practice. She does not romanticize craft as static heritage; instead, she recontextualizes it within modern and contemporary artistic dialogues.

Sexuality and Sensuous Materiality

The tactile nature of Mukherjee's work invites a deeply sensory response. Knotted fibers resemble sinews, tendrils, or veins; ceramic surfaces evoke skin, coral, or organic crusts. This sensuous materiality foregrounds touch, texture, and bodily awareness. The

viewer experiences the sculptures not only visually but imaginatively through tactile perception.

In feminist theory, reclaiming sensuality from patriarchal objectification is crucial. Sensuality has often been framed as passive or decorative when associated with femininity. Importantly, this sensuality is mediated through abstraction and ambiguity. The forms do not offer explicit erotic imagery; instead, they suggest sexuality as an aspect of growth, fertility, and interconnectedness. Through abstraction, Mukherjee protects the body from commodification while affirming its experiential richness.

Theoretical Framework

1. Feminist Materialism: Feminist materialism emphasizes the agency of matter and the inseparability of body and material environment. Mukherjee's work resonates strongly with this framework. Her sculptures appear animated, suggesting that matter itself participates in meaning-making.

2. Postcolonial Modernism: Indian modernism grappled with colonial legacy and indigenous identity. Mukherjee's use of hemp and craft-based processes re-centers local material histories within global art discourse.

3. Craft as Critical Practice: Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes craft as a site of critical resistance. Mukherjee's oeuvre exemplifies how craft-based processes can produce conceptual rigor.

Case Studies of Selected Works

- **Early Fiber Installations (1970s–80s):** Large suspended forms composed of dyed hemp demonstrate her mastery of tension and gravity. The works appear alive—neither decorative nor functional but sculpturally autonomous.
- **Totemic Ceramic Sculptures (1990s):** Vertical ceramic forms evoke ritual presence. Their surfaces mimic organic textures, reinforcing themes of growth and continuity.
- **Bronze Organic Forms (2000s):** Her later bronze sculptures synthesize previous explorations. They possess both permanence and vitality, bridging material experimentation with thematic continuity.

The posthumous retrospective of Mrinalini Mukherjee at the National Gallery of Modern Art marked a decisive moment in the re-evaluation of her artistic contribution. The exhibition not only assembled key works spanning fiber, ceramic, and bronze phases but also repositioned her within the broader narrative of modern and contemporary Indian art. Critics, curators, and scholars began to acknowledge her as a pioneering force who fundamentally expanded the sculptural vocabulary of the subcontinent.



Conclusion

The sculptural practice of Mrinalini Mukherjee represents a transformative and intellectually rigorous chapter in contemporary Indian art. Emerging within a post-independence milieu shaped by modernist aspirations and inherited colonial frameworks, Mukherjee forged a path that resisted both academic realism and dominant Western paradigms of modern sculpture. Her contribution lies not merely in stylistic innovation but in a fundamental rethinking of material, embodiment, and artistic hierarchy. By expanding the vocabulary of sculpture beyond stone and polished bronze, she altered the conceptual terrain of Indian modernism itself.

Material in Mukherjee's oeuvre is never passive or neutral; it is active, resistant, and expressive. The physical labor of knotting, twisting, and binding fiber foregrounds process as an embodied act. Her sculptures seem to grow rather than to be assembled. Fiber becomes a monument—asserting verticality and mass without sacrificing pliability. Clay becomes an organism—its surfaces textured like bark, skin, or coral. Bronze becomes sensuous—no longer merely a symbol of permanence but a carrier of organic memory. Simultaneously, Mukherjee's feminist outlook operates through this very materiality. Rather than adopting overt political imagery, she embedded critique within her sculptural language.

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