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Prachi Priyanka

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Quest for Selfhood: Women Artists in the South Asian Visual Arts

By Prachi Priyanka

Abstract

There has been a recent increase in country-focused publications on women artists in Southeast Asia that highlight the newfound interest in feminist-inspired discourses and histories of women artists. India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh have shared a common history and culture for millennia. The socio-economic cultural patterns in these three countries are very similar, particularly when it comes to the status of women. Notwithstanding the difference in religions followed and practiced in these countries, the women here more-or-less experience similar challenges in their advancement. These three countries have traditionally suffered from poverty, illiteracy, health and infrastructure issues, and are bracketed as third world countries on the basis of data pertaining to aforementioned criteria for determining development. My paper aims to identify and understand the challenges of women artists in these countries and examine how these artists explore and express their identities through paintings, installation art, and performances. My study will also highlight different perspectives on the marginalization of women artists, suggesting lines of inquiry that might be profitable in the future.

Keywords: Art world, Feminism, Gender, Identity, Marginalization

Introduction

A History of Women's art would begin with survival needs.
Hedges

Visual culture permeates our everyday lives and affects the way we see the world and our relationship with it. From advertisements to art galleries, we are literally bombarded with images of women presented as sex objects for the male gaze. The inferior treatment in comparison to men has often been cited as a result of this commodification of women and their works—an issue raised in feminist discourses. Kahr is right to observe that some works of women classified and dismissed as decorative or domestic arts are of equal stature as significant paintings of the age (Kahr 28-31). The concern regarding prominent absence of women artists from the mainstream art world was observed in a review article in an American periodical when an anonymous author argued that: “a survey of nearly the whole field of Art has scarcely revealed to us any woman artist who has risen above mediocrity; nor has it revealed a single one entitled to a place in the front rank, among great artists”¹.

Critics have pointed out the lack of women's special issues in magazines and feminist art studios and the absence of their contribution in history art books in the 1970s. Linda Nochlin's essay in 1971 “Why have there been no great women artists?” carefully examines the obstacles that prevent women from making their mark in the art world. Feminist historians have demonstrated that terms used in art history to determine greatness of an artist are not ‘gender-neutral’. Such socially constructed categories maintain the canonical status of male artists and

¹ Southern Review, April 1869, 301.

ensure the privileging of male taste. This has led to a global increase in the evaluation of social processes of art production and expose the gender bias in art institutions. (Low 4)

Gender discrimination is especially pronounced in visual arts in which most popular artists are male. Arthur Schopenhauer wrote that women have “proved incapable of a truly great, genuine and original achievement in art, or indeed of creating anything at all of lasting value: this strikes one most forcibly in regard to painting ...” (Cowen 93-113). Similar opinion was voiced by Dr Tietze-Conrat when he remarked at the 1910 exhibition that showcased the works of women artists: “There is not a single one among them who may be classed amongst the leaders in the total development of art, none who brought about a large or even a small revolution in the domain of art” (Tietze Conrat 30).

Feminists have often attributed the long-drawn absence of women artists to social and cultural barriers and often questioned why art historians generally ignored the existence of women artists. In her research paper “Why Women Succeed, and Fail, in the Arts”, Tyler Cowen came up with four hypotheses to account for the differences between male and female artists. According to her the absence of women artists may be explained through genetic hypothesis which claims that men and women have differing abilities at an innate biological level. According to this, men are genetically more intelligent and therefore more successful. The second hypothesis, on the contrary, maintains that women suffer on grounds of discrimination in developing their abilities and hence carry a negative self-image imposed by the society. This prevents them from becoming the great artists that they potentially could be. The third hypothesis is the Maternal Obstacles Theory claims that women are no less skilled than men. However, it is due to the reasons like pregnancy which are innate to the female sex that they may have to compromise in their career growth. The fourth hypothesis claims that female artistic accomplishments are not less in any way and hence they stand at par to male artists in the art world. (Cowen, 94)

Materials and Methods

This paper uses a qualitative method of analysis, emphasizing the value laden enquiry on the position of women’s art in South Asia. Reflecting on a varied range of art works by women artists, this paper intends to discuss the causes of women’s long drawn absence from the art world, the medium and quality of their works and the ways they can establish power and prestige in the art world. With a close examination of their art works and a study of perspectives offered by art critics such as Erica Tietz Conrat and Linda Nochlin, this paper covers a multitude of approaches adopted by the artists.

Results

This paper is dedicated to investigating the art and art installations of South Asian women artists in the modern era. I argue that there are several instances where we find gaps in the representation of women that account for gendered differences in artistic sponsoring. In the context of South Asian art, Lakshmi Priya Daniel’s study on the challenges faced by South Indian women artists is very insightful. Her article “Signatures of a Collective Self” locates the manner in which these women artists are affected by familial, institutional and social systems and explores the experiences of the women artists in terms of their multiple roles. (Journal of International Women’s Studies, Nov 2016). Often the art of women artists has been undermined and under-rated as minor art as Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock have highlighted in their study ‘Old

Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology'. According to their groundbreaking work, the women artists have suffered because the hierarchy is strategically maintained through pushing women to engage their creativity in decorative arts and then relegating decorative arts an inferior position with respect to paintings and sculpture. Rozzika Parker observes:

The sex of the artist matters. It conditions the way art is seen and discussed. But precisely how does it matter? Art history views the art of the past from certain perspectives and organizes art into categories and classifications based on a stratified system of values, which leads to a hierarchy of art forms. In this hierarchy, the arts of painting and sculpture enjoy an elevated status while other arts that adorn people, homes or utensils are relegated to a lesser culture sphere under such terms as 'applied decorative' or 'lesser' arts. (44)

A parallel study of the women artists in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan has similar findings despite differences in religious practices. Women artists have been marginalized despite a wide array of equivalent works produced by them, and so many have embarked on a creative quest for selfhood. Their works question the prevailing hierarchy, social constructs, and silence on their exclusion from the art history canon.

Discussion

When the partition of India took place in 1947 two more nations emerged based on the religious majority. In the wake of independence, India and the newly formed Pakistan needed to form their own national and cultural identities. Rural and folk traditions were reclaimed and many modernist ideas of the western world formed inspirational sources to intertwine with regional influences—on collective as well as individual levels. The women artists were far and few and mostly succumbed to secondary status to that of their male counterparts. Aside from eminent artists like the sculptor Hemi Bawa, the photographer Dayanita Singh, or painters like Amrita Sher-gill and Arpita Singh, we do not hear of the works of women artists being sold at similar prices as men's. A striking contrast in artist status is illustrated by how Raja Ravi Varma has been accorded near cult status in the world of Indian art, while his artist sister, Mangala Bai, has been invariably marginalized and denied the same privilege despite the fact that she actively pursued art up to the age of 84. Anjali Purohit, an artist based in Mumbai, explains in a matter-of-fact manner: "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" (Roy). This mindset leads to an unconscious bias that reflects in disparity in pricing of their works with respect to male artists. Mangala Bai Thampuratty (1866-1954) was the first woman artist of 19th century India to own a studio. She showed great expertise in representing realities in her canvases, which mostly revolved around domestic and devotional themes. Mangala Bai was an undeniably skilled artist with a remarkable dexterity which she executed in her oil paintings, but also in her realistic approach of subject matter which were often personal and autobiographical in nature. It was a taboo for noblewomen of the upper class to take up painting as a vocation, and so Mangala Bai explored all the possibilities of her potential but within the limits that were agreeable to society. An interesting contrast of sensibilities between the siblings can be seen by comparing two paintings titled *Alms Giving* (1899) rendered by Raja Ravi Varma and Mangala Bai. Ajayakumar, in the Women Painters of Kerala exhibition catalogue, points out that Mangala Bai's *Alms Giving*

is a 'significant painting'. Raja Ravi Varma portrays the upper class bejewelled woman throwing money at a young male beggar, while Mangala Bai's work shows a young woman ladling out gruel into a begging ascetic's bowl. Daniel beautifully highlights the difference between the two artworks, showing a glimpse into the differing sensibilities of men and women. She writes:

Where the former is situated in the public domain of the temple, the latter locates itself in the private sphere of the home; while Raja Ravi Varma shows the middle-aged woman's lusciousness, Mangala Bai further pushes the boundaries depicting the grossly thin, aged beggar-woman, semi-nude, while the young girl with her cascading tresses wears a simple yet luxuriant blouse and lower garment. (58)

The contrast also highlights the underlying caste system and class discrimination prevalent in pre-Independent India and a strain that continues to play a divisive role in power dynamics to this day.

The celebration of pluralist, individualist claims of society became a global reality in the 1970s and 1980s. Several theories and discourses on deconstruction, feminism, and subaltern studies has an impact on South Asian art as women artists struggled to find a foothold and sought to establish their identities on their own terms. Works of artists like Padma Reddy and Rathi Devi show the transition from a search for collective identity to a more individualistic one that continues to explore the female psyche. In the etching and woodcut works of Reddy, we can observe recurring motifs such as roses amidst thorns, women wearing sunglasses, or everyday objects that show her convictions and experiences in an autobiographical manner. In an interview, Padma Reddy reveals the crux of her pursuit when she says: "whatever an artist or person does in truth, remains closest to who they are" (Daniel, 63) If Reddy boldly brings forth her own experiences of the world, Rathi Devi, through her works, mirrors how societal norms "ignor[e] the sounds of expression especially by women" and how all of it is a way to isolate and suppress women in a way that they do not question power structures.

This brings us to the questions: do women artists consciously link themselves to their gender through their art? and does their art/aesthetic employ feminine symbols? Linda Nochlin in her essay "Why have there been no great women artists?" insists that mere choice of certain subject matters or restriction to certain subjects should not be equated with a style feminine or not. She puts forward her opinion that women need to adopt '*masculine*' attributes of single-mindedness, concentration, tenaciousness, and absorption in ideas and craftsmanship for their own sake in order to continue to succeed in the world of art. Only such commitment and imitation of masculine sensibility towards work and art can create space for them. Such discourse also makes us curious to investigate how women artists in South Asia deal with their subject matter, especially in their approach to female figures in art. Besides, further enquiries are made to understand whether women artists of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh share common grounds in terms of their expression. Also, if so, what is the cohesive factor that binds them together?

There has been a recent increase in interest in the histories of women artists, particularly in South Asia. This is evident from the rise in number of women-centric exhibitions, book projects, and art journals published in the last few decades. By examining images created mostly by women artists in different socio-historical contexts of South Asia, this paper endeavors to study the quest for selfhood among women artists.

In her paper titled 'An Intelligent Rebellion: Women Artists of Pakistan', Salima Hashmi mentions the drafted Manifesto at the Pakistan National Exhibition in Lahore in 1983 which talked about following a set of principles to guide artists in their struggle for cultural development in

Pakistan. Fifteen artists signed this manifesto, and though this document was never made public, Salima Hasmi writes that it was important because it was “a symbolic gesture that suggests women artists had grown conscious for some time of the political and social oppression imposed by the regime of General Zia-ul-Haq” (Hashmi 229). During the political upheaval of 1947, marked by the partition of India and formation of Pakistan, Muslims brought with them urban court traditions and women were mostly restricted to practice their arts within the domestic sphere. There were only two art education centers in Pakistan in 1947 and one was The Fine Arts Department which was exclusively for women. Anna Molka, the first Head of the Department, was a passionate expressionist painter who worked on still life portraits and included socio-historical and mythological themes in her works. She played a significant role in persuading women to take up art as a career and helped them find routes to go out and explore art schools abroad.

Another artist, Esmat Rahim, was the wife of a Pakistani diplomat and somewhere lost her identity as an artist in fulfilling the role of Rahim’s wife. She found her voice and vision towards the end of her artistic life, and her works remain undisputed in their genius and exceptional maturity. Her later works show her inner most thoughts, fears, and fantasies that hover on a surrealist zone. She was friends with Amrita Sher-gill, an Indian artist of great fame. Amrita Sher-gill has often been referred to as India’s Frida Kahlo for the aesthetic blend of traditional and western art forms found in her works. She is also considered a revolutionary woman artist and the founder of modern art in India. Through her self-portraits, Sher-gill sought to express her inner self, and though they were called narcissistic by many, her works give a glimpse into the way women would see themselves as the subject in her works. One of the most captivating, curious, and alluring artists of her time, Sher-gill was fortunate to receive extensive training and exposure to the works of Italian masters. She was also influenced by the Mughal and the Ajanta paintings. In 1937, she travelled to the southern parts of India and was deeply moved by the plight of many villagers and unprivileged people. This began to be reflected in her works and eventually gave rise to paintings such as ‘Brahmacharis’, ‘Bride’s Toilet’, and ‘South Indian Villagers Going to Market’. Her painting “Les Toilettes” depicts a bride’s chamber as she gets ready for her wedding. The large mourning eyes of native women show Sher-gill’s deep engagement with Indian subjects, while the use of a tinge of red reminds us of Gauguin’s paintings and the arrangement of forms are similar to Cezanne’s still life paintings.

Anjolie Ela Menon (1940) is an Indian painter and muralist best known for her religious-themed works, portraits, and nudes that were rendered in vibrant colors and engaged with a variety of styles, from cubism to techniques that recalled the artists of the European Renaissance. Her works show startling resemblances with the works of Van Gogh, Modigliani, and the Expressionists. She studied female nudes with a frontal perspective, averted head, and slight body elongation. The result is a dynamic combination of eroticism and melancholy. She has been conferred the National Kalidas Samman award and the Padma shri for her insightful and sensitive portrayal of the identity and spirit of womanhood through a variety of media. It is difficult to compartmentalize Menon’s works because her oeuvre constantly underwent changes in the search for the right idiom for self-expression. She says:

I am neither a didactic nor narrative painter. I am hardly concerned with events, though I like to lay my people bare – I like to bare them a bit beyond what is decent, sometimes ripping open a chest to reveal the heart beating within. Of course, there are many who have identified with the women I paint, especially

those who are trapped or sitting alone on a chair, or those innocent ones with a newly awakened sensuality, and those who are waiting.

Zubeida Agha is recognized and lauded as a premiere painter of Pakistan, who exuded a rare courage and determination to launch a modern idiom of painting, which first baffled and later overwhelmed art critics and viewers. Also hailed as 'a pioneer of modern art in Pakistan', she trained herself under a pupil of Picasso and marveled in a dominant interplay of forms and colors. Zubaida was a colorist, and her occasional motifs have a lyrical element with a floral affinity. She played a significant role in the art world of Pakistan as a crucial figure in establishing Pakistan's first private art gallery. Salima Hashmi observes that the women painters in the late seventies in Pakistan tried to mimic the male gaze in their works and coined these attempts as a "faithful echo of their male counterparts" Ironically, Pakistani women's search for their own content and form of expression in art came only after the overthrow of Z A Bhutto's civil government which set the stage for the surprising development and maturing of the work of Pakistani women artists. (Hashmi, 233)

Nalini Malani, a contemporary Indian artist, has earned fame for her lush, politically charged mixed-media paintings and drawings, videos, installations, and theater works. She was among the first to explicitly introduce feminist issues in her work, in the 1980s and made her mark with visually and conceptually layered theater and installation pieces. Her works reflect her personal experience of displacement caused by the Partition of India as well as her profound interest in Hindu and Greek mythology, 19th-century English "nonsense" writing, and early 20th-century experimental theater. Her works present an amalgam of abstraction, figuration, and text as she explores, within the given framework, issues like gender roles, transnational politics, and the ramifications of rampant globalization. *Remembering Toba Tek Singh* is her prominent artwork that depicts social and political issues that led to the partition. The title was borrowed from Manto's story titled *Toba Tek Singh* where the main protagonist identifies himself with the place to which he belongs and hence refuses to travel to India and breathes his last breath at a no man's land. Nalini Malani's *Toba Tek Singh* is a large multimedia and video installation that was shown in 2002. It includes a number of large tin trunks representing migration and refugees; the trunks contain video monitors that show archival images from the dropping of atomic bombs in Japan in 1945. Viewers too, are invited to participate in the art space, casting their shadows and illuminated by their projection.

Engagement with socio political concerns can also be witnessed in works of artists like Abidi. She engages primarily with photographs, digital manipulation, graphic drawings, and videos which showcase the political and cultural history of Indo-Pak events. She specializes in juxtaposing the past and the present of both the nations to reflect on the concept of borders, boundaries, nationhood, and identities. The video 'Section Yellow' is a comment on the political unrest in Pakistan and centers on the notion of waiting. The work can be divided into two sections – the outdoor security area and the inner waiting room. Carefully choreographed, the film highlights Abidi's own experiences of a corrupt bureaucracy in her nation.

Similar engagement with societal concerns can be seen in the works of contemporary artist Adeela Suleman who specializes in individualized reliefs, sculptures, and installations made from combinations of different materials. Her brand of art involves using unusual materials to depict grave concerns such as safety, terrorism, murder, destruction, and women's empowerment. Another characteristic of her work is the way she employs comic elements in them despite the seriousness of their themes. She extensively uses found objects made of metal, sculptures, and

body armours for women that beautify as well as cage the female figure. What is striking about Suleman's works is that though she uses miniaturist style in her narratives she brings a fresh perspective to it. The traditional miniature that focus primarily on idyllic landscapes and courtly scenes, while Suleman's works are replete with imagery of bloodshed, death, and violence. The way she explores the fleeting and fragile ephemerality of life is a characteristic of her works. Suleman emphatically brings together pastoralized scenes as rendered in the Islamic tradition that contrast with the stainless-steel medium. The recurring motifs of her work consist of birds, flowers, and forms that are repetitive in pattern or replete with symbolic meaning. Her love for nature, art, and chaos of man is noticeable in the fragmented documentaries and catastrophic occurrences that are evident in her works.

Nilima Sheikh is an artist from India who is known for her miniature paintings that show influence from several art styles like the Japanese Ukiyo-e to Rajasthani, Pahari and Mughal miniatures. Rooted in Eastern painting traditions and oral tradition found in vernacular folk songs as well as her own life experiences, she creates mystical imaginary landscapes that address feminine experiences. Her traditional tempera painting techniques question the darker sides of Indian traditions, such as arranged marriages, that often subvert women. In her series of twelve tempera paintings *When Champa Grew Up* she presents a narrative of a young girl who goes through marriage, torture, and immolation in the hands of her husband's family. The series is domestic in its setting and concerns the everyday lives of women. Through such works, she endeavors to express her rage and concern towards the unsettling realities of a woman's life in a patriarchal society. Her traumatic experience of Gujarat riots also impacted her deeply, and art gave voice to her rage against issues that disturbed her.

The search to find one's own identity is raised in Shahzia Sikandar's (9) probing art works. A renowned Pakistani artist and internationally acclaimed for her outstanding brilliance, she was invited to exhibit her works at the Renaissance Society, the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, and the Whitney Museum of American Art. Shahzia is a New York based artist who reflects on whether identity can be isolated; whether it was her Muslim identity, her female identity, her Asian identity, her Asian-American identity, or her hyphenated identity, Shahzia finds that she belongs to each of the categories and they overlap and contribute to her artistic oeuvre as a whole.

It is this quest for identity, in Tayeba Begum Lipi, she takes this to a completely different dimension in the three-minute video *I wed myself*. Lipi prepares herself to play both the genders in the video; she is shown doing traditional makeup as a bride draped in formal attire for her wedding, while in the next shot she crops her hair and adds a moustache to also adopt the role of groom. Thus, Lipi takes on both the roles of husband and wife-to-be in her video where she presents herself as bride and groom simultaneously in one frame. The video aims to bring out the transformation process of the artist as it is projected alongside. This video is significant because it suggests the possibility of one person having both masculine and feminine traits. In this way, the artist tactfully interrogates the definition of gender. Such an approach to gender roles not only addresses societal contradictions between real identities and those ingrained in misogyny, but it also questions the sexualized structures that dominate lives of women in South Asian countries like India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan.

Tayeba Begum Lipi is a Bangladeshi visual artist from Dhaka, Bangladesh who addresses issues relating to human life with her works. Through a creative range of media, she explores feminist issues of marginality and representation of the female body. In her installation titled *Bizarre and Beautiful* (2011), she surprises her audience by her choice of rigid razor blades to

show something that is innately feminine, female undergarments. The choice is deliberate and serves a dual purpose: on one hand it offers protection to the imagined wearer, while on the other, it issues a warning to the onlooker.

The female body is also explored in Mrinalini Mukherjee's work where she uses knotted ropes in earthy or rich glowing colors. But while Lipi's works are far from sensual, Mukherjee's 'The Female Body' evokes a strong sense of sexuality with phallic forms, and folds and intricate curves. Her sculptures are overtly sensual, referencing aspects of human sexuality and the fecundity of nature. Similarly, her work *Jauba* refers to the hibiscus flower. In this later work, hemp dyed in brilliant colours is manipulated into flower-like forms around freestanding metal armatures, almost human in scale. In an interview she said, "I work emotionally and intuitively and do not like analysing my feelings during the work process". This is one of the characteristics associated with most women artists—that they follow their instincts and create their art as an expression of their innermost thoughts. Mukherjee was also one of a number of women artists whose work emphasized the use of textiles and fibres and established them to be at par with the materials conventionally associated with fine art. Pushpamala N was a trained Indian sculptor who eventually shifted to photography to explore her interest in narrative figuration. She has been referred to as "the most entertaining artist-iconoclast of contemporary Indian art"². Her works revolve around pivotal narratives played by, or based on women from history and other fictional narratives of popular imagination. Her works often critique female stereotypes in India and the reductive classifications furthered by ethnographic documentation. She subverts the traditional representations of women from history to draw attention to the constructed nature of the image. In one of her series, she represents the seven moods, such as happy, sad, or erotic, that are traditionally associated with women in northern Indian poetry and paintings. She references Bollywood archetypes and narratives that have often drawn comparisons between her and Cindy Sherman's performances. In her work 'Circus', she presents her own self where her canvas becomes her own body. Circus presents the popular image of women in circuses, and the challenge the artist imposes on her own self is to objectify herself to the male gaze by placing herself in the central position.

For a long time, Pakistani women artists have remained bound to representational art as portrayed by male artists. But when they liberated their vision, bringing it closer to their own aesthetics—the aesthetics of an ancient reservoir of cultural experience and art production—these women began "speaking in many tongues" (Hashmi, 235) The realization that they have a voice of their own and a personalized vocabulary to express their deepest thoughts brought a range of untold stories and silent sagas into the art world.

One thing that was a common experience for the South Asian women artists was the need to dissociate themselves with the conventional approaches that had become redundant and required a fresh perspective to view the world. Nudes, which were frowned upon in Muslim communities and yet seen as objects of desire in the works of male artists, transformed into symbols of rebellion, social oppression, and political dissent of female artists. Besides, these women artists blurred the gap between high and low arts, and widened the context of art production by being more inclusive and embracing the traditional folk crafts as well as urban art forms built and practiced in the confines of domesticity. New realms are being explored too; women are turning to diverse forms such as the popular truck painting tradition, crochet and embroidery, ceramics, and photography, and they are bringing them into paintings, multimedia installations, and performance art. Women artists have also moved toward abstract art, political statements, and satire as a reaction to repression, corruption, and violence that are prevalent in a male dominated culture.

² Alasdair Foster in Talking-Pictures.net

Contemporary Indian art has also moved forward with women taking the lead in artistic innovation. Gender equity and mobility in geographical, socio-cultural, and stylistic spaces have led to the birth of New Age women who do not seek validation through their femininity or other cultural markers to assert her presence.

Conclusion

Women have always been engaged in creating art that has been often been relegated to domestic sphere and hence marginalized in the patriarchal construct of the society. Though the Indian notion acknowledges industry and craft as art forms, yet the strict hierarchical codes and caste distinctions become restrictive in allowing such arts to gain societal status. Women and their art negotiate the three mutually inclusive trajectories of identity, self, and position. The search for identity and self can sometimes be autobiographical, or it may be founded on the collective in global, national, regional, feminine and iconic terms.

Womanifesto, an international platform for women aimed at developing a diverge range of activities, and described as ‘the first of its kind in Asia’, made an objective statement that highlights that creating space for women’s art involves a step towards accepting the way women are, “To promote a greater awareness of women in the society in which they exist by presenting their ways of thinking and doing things, which will ultimately (affect) among other things, the conservation of our environment as a whole.”³

Greda Lerner cautioned against the approach where women, determined to prove their mark, extensively collected awards and accolades and exhibited their works on international platforms. She said that such categories as ‘women of genius’, ‘worthies’, and ‘notables’ are labels and value systems framed by a patriarchal set up and recognized by men. Neither a compensatory history nor a history about women as victims would suffice to recover their histories, for they are both methodically flawed and analytically limiting (Low, 6). Erica Tietz Conrat rightly insists:

“A new chapter in the representation of the human form” would ensue “*when the female artist no longer wishes to be ‘manly’*, when she has cultivated to full bloom the woman in herself ... Only then will she be able to give humankind something new, only then will we have women’s art in the highest sense.

What is important then is to clearly identify how women artists want to be placed, for segregating works on them through book projects may again lead to another pitfall; that is, relegating women to a separate chapter, book, or gallery. Barbara Andaya rightly observed that these inclusions function to present female participation only as an insertion, an “interruption in a metanarrative dominated by men”. (2000: 26) The female body is perceived as an object of desire and consumption in terms of sensuality, sexuality, or divinity. However, it is important to consider how women artists perceive themselves both as collective beings and as harbingers of change. (Daniel, 70)

Though the invisibility of women artists in South Asia is noticeable and points to the power structures that remain unshaken, sustained efforts by these women artists to reclaim artisanal practices and create space for social consciousness are designed to address such enquiries. We must read the silences and recognize that gender inequality exists in the art world and bring to light the concerns of students who want to practice art or read about women artists. Female students

³ “Womanifesto I: 1997.” *Womanifesto*, www.womanifesto.com/events/womanifesto-1-1997/.

become alienated from the stories of artists and artworks if they are only filled with the ambitions, psyches, sexual desires, and lived experiences of men. By examining images of women created mostly by female artists in different visual culture forms and socio-historical contexts of South Asia, the world can learn, interpret, and uncover cultural and gender assumptions embedded here in visual culture.

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