

The Role of Women in Painting: Unveiling Gender Inequity in Art

Sukhpreet Kaur, Manju

University Institute of Liberal Arts and Humanities, Chandigarh University, Gharuan, Mohali (Punjab), India

Email address:

sukhpreet.e10108@cumail.in (Sukhpreet Kaur), manju.uila@cumail.in (Manju)

To cite this article:

Sukhpreet Kaur, Manju. The Role of Women in Painting: Unveiling Gender Inequity in Art. *English Language, Literature & Culture*. Vol. 8, No. 3, 2023, pp. 39-43. doi: 10.11648/j.ellc.20230803.12

Received: May 7, 2023; **Accepted:** May 25, 2023; **Published:** July 31, 2023

Abstract: Women have been seen through the lens of art from the very commencement of civilization. Beauty itself was personified in the form of a woman. An effort is being made to analyse various shades that have been concatenated with her image over the period. Women have been an important part of society. She has played many important roles like homemaker, mother, wife, and at times lover. Women have equally participated in many activities like paintings but never got the recognition that they deserve. The popular paintings of Ajanta paintings have also shown females as highlighting the fertility part in their ample curves. This movement is further explained in the Mauryan and Buddhist periods, where they represented women as the Yogini. Also, in Khajuraho sculptures, women are revealed as Apsaras and Surasundaris who are involved in various activities. Here female nudity has been regarded as a powerful fertility charm. Artists in Rajasthani miniature painting often represented moods (bhava) through a female character known as the Leading lady (nayika). In his paintings, Raja Ravi Verma described the divine aspect of ladies. Amrita Shergil, India's most recognized female artist, also created feminist works. M. F. Hussain's favourite topics were likewise ladies. The representation of women in this situation is cynosure. Women's socioeconomic standing has been mirrored by Indian artists throughout history. However, women in India in the twenty-first century have numerous challenges, and their social standing is rapidly changing. Women in India are now seen not only as nurturers and mothers but also in a variety of important jobs in society. This paper analyses how contemporaries interact in this study.

Keywords: Feminism, Indian Art, Paintings, Gender, Naming, Patriarchy

1. Introduction

Women have been portrayed and idolized throughout the history of art. Women have been underrepresented behind the canvas despite their contributions to the visual arts field. [5] When observing the producers of art all over history, it seems that various women artists have been eliminated from old art history. Men make up the bulk of well-known artists, often referred to as "Masters of the Arts." Even language is used to encourage the awareness that a male is the only gender who can be well-practised and valued in this field, as the title "Master" illustrates. Behind the canvas, there is very little historical portrayal of women. The Guerrilla Girls is centred on the premise that women should only be seen and respected for their physical appearance or beauty, rather than as artists. In the late twentieth century, this assembly of feminist activist painters challenged the paucity of female artists. The

organization is emphasising the disparities between male and female artists by citing figures such as the fact that just 4% of recent artists in the Metropolitan Museum of Art are female, yet accounting for 72 percent of the gallery's nudes.

Literature and philosophy served as additional sources for gender theory. The French philosopher and author Simone de Beauvoir stated [2] in her 1949 best-seller, *The Second Sex*, "One is not born, one is formed a woman." This in-depth analysis of the "creation" of womanhood covered anthropological, literary, Marxist, and Freudian theories that, in Beauvoir's view, genuinely influenced how women behaved. She believed that women behaved in ways that men would perceive them, rather than how they would perceive themselves. This study drew on existential and phenomenological philosophy, which emphasized how an individual subject or "self" develops about an object or "other."

Throughout the twentieth century, there has been disagreement about what art is and who creates it. An essay by Linda Nochlin titled [12] "Why Have There Been No Great Female Artists?" (1971) illustrates the opinion that women have been thoroughly removed from the history of the art industry described in the following lines:

The fault lies not in our stars, education is understood to include everything that happens to us from the moment we enter this world of meaningful symbols, signs, and signals [11]. The miracle is, in fact, that given the overwhelming odds against women, or Blacks, so many of both have managed to achieve so much sheer excellence, in those bailiwicks of white masculine prerogatives like science, art, or the arts.

It is a ground-breaking work in feminist art history and feminist art theory, indicating the social shifts that were taking place at that time. Despite claims that social attitudes toward equality and inclusion had shifted since the 1970s, the Guerrilla Girls, a feminist group argued that slights were different. Many women now say that female artists have never received the same level of recognition as their male counterparts, not because of the absence of ability, but because of misogynistic notions that were popularized in history and are still reinforced by patriarchy today. This misogynistic viewpoint has resulted in several beautiful and well-known paintings of women, but few female painters.

The aim of this study is to examine the historical underrepresentation and challenges faced by women in the visual arts field. The study will investigate the societal and cultural factors that have contributed to the exclusion of women artists from art history and the perpetuation of misogynistic notions. Additionally, the study will explore the efforts made by feminist art movements, such as the Guerrilla Girls, to address these disparities and advocate for gender equality in the art world. By examining the historical context, literature, and philosophical perspectives, the study aims to shed light on the experiences of women artists and contribute to a broader understanding of gender dynamics in the field of visual arts.

2. Literature Review

This literature review explores the relationship between women and art, focusing on the historical representation of women in painting, the lack of female painters, and the emergence of feminist movements within the art world. The review examines the misogynistic viewpoints that have influenced the portrayal of women in art, particularly through the example of the Madonna during the Renaissance period. It further discusses the challenges faced by female artists, such as limited opportunities and societal criticism. The review also highlights the impact of historical events, including World War I, on women's roles in society and the subsequent shifts in the art world. Finally, it explores the rise of feminist art movements, such as the New Woman Movement and the feminist art movement of the 1970s, and the contributions of female artists in challenging established

norms.

The "creation" [9] of femininity was the subject of a thorough investigation that included anthropological, literary, Marxist, and Freudian theories. Women have been worshipped in the arts for their physical figure throughout history, as evidenced by the Madonna portrayed during the Renaissance period. Despite being a wonderful work of art and a significant icon for religious people, many feminists claim that Madonna epitomizes everything that is wrong with women's image in painting. While being portrayed as an idolized figure, the Madonna is also a representation of virginity and purity, reinforcing the concept that women must be both beautiful and pure to be praised. An ideology that perpetuates patriarchal ideals for women and the notion that the female body is something to be respected, but only when she is young and pure.

During this time, there was a distinct lack of female painters. It's not unexpected to assume the male-dominated structure of the Renaissance art guilds that ruled over painting. Sofonisba Anguissola, the first renowned female Renaissance artist, was born in 1523 in Cremona, Lombardy, and was not from either of Italy's recognized cultural centres. However, her works did not become generally known until the 16th century, rather than the 15th century, when the Renaissance began. In my opinion, this indicates a change in cultural perceptions of women in the arts, demonstrating that Italy has moved away from the passive role of sitting and being depicted in works of art to the active participation of highly gifted women in and production of art. Women were subjected to harsh criticism even when they defied the implicit limitations of society. The "New Woman Movement" was a feminist ideology that encouraged women to combat boundaries that limited their sphere of effect to the home and family life, with their whole worth based on being a good wife and mother. It aimed to empower women to have more social and economic switches in their lives.

One of the most essential factors to examine while analyzing how these developments impacted women's positions in art is the shifting role of women throughout World War I (1914-1918). Women were rapidly allowed into the workforce to do man's jobs due to the lack of men in society as a result of their role in the war. They were rapidly portrayed as strong, self-sufficient individuals who were critical to the country's development. This had a profound and irreversible impact on women's roles in society since they were now responsible for the household's financial and emotional support. This was reflected in the art world, with female painters such as Kathe Kollwitz, a German artist, emerging. She was renowned for her graphic design skills. Her graphic post-impressionist painting style, which featured an expressionist female figure with themes of social protest and urgency, was well-known. Few female artists acquired renown because of the prevalent opinion of the sacredness of family life. Georgia O'Keeffe, [15] who is today known as the "Mother of American Modernism" was a striking exception. However, in her fight for recognition in the art world, she contended that her achievements should not be

labelled as female. Perhaps this is why, in the 1950s, she was able to do so much because she did not try to upset the existing quo, preferring instead to operate inside it. In difference to O'Keeffe's viewpoint, [6] "Feminist Art" and principles commenced resurfacing in the 1970s, with women confronting the male-dominated art establishment once more. The feminist art movement aimed to tear down artistic barriers as well as the recognition of the glass ceiling. [1] The Guerrilla Girls are one of this period's most well-known art activist groups. They reveal gender and cultural bias, as well as exploitation in politics, movies, the arts, and pop culture, through absurd imagery. To retain the spotlight on feminist problems, they remained anonymous. Mary Beth Edelson, Cindy Sherman, Hannah Wike, and Lynn Hershman Leeson are some other well-known artists from this period. The artists offered an alternative to the established quo of women being understood but not voiced in the world of art.

The second wave of feminism, which was inspired by Betty Friedan's book [4] "The Feminine Mystique," which was published in 1963, I think had a significant impact on this artistic uprising. Friedan's study absorbed women's lack of employment opportunities, despite their qualifications, and their frustration with their mainly domestic determination. This corresponds to the timeline of the feminist art movement, which resulted in a greater awareness of the inequity encountered by women in the art world. However, given the pervasive misogyny in the art field, little is likely to change. During the 1970s, the physical representation of women in art remained virtually unchanged. Feminist artists, such as Cindy Sherman, Lynn Hershman Leeson, Mary Beth Edelson, and Hannah Wike, began to propose various customs of women being characterized by the artists. In-depth theories from anthropology, literature, Marxism, and Freud were discussed in this examination of the "making" of femininity. Known as the Feminist Avant-Garde, this group rebelled in contrast to the system and offered an alternate depiction of women; nonetheless, these representations were in the minority. Despite these mindset shifts, data reveal that women continue to be poorer, but in a little better position than their male colleagues. According to statistics, only one of the top 20 most popular exhibitions in the world in 2018 was presented by a woman artist: Joana Vasconcelos: I'm Your Mirror at the Guggenheim Bilbao.

Art, according to ancient philosophers [10], has both an ethical and an aesthetic goal. It was expressed when Shivam or Mangalam (goddess) was thoroughly related to Anandam and Sundaram. The relationship of feminism with Indian art is easy to understand in this context. Every perfect effort of art met two criteria: Nayanandakar (pleasing to the eye) and Manoharan (stealing the heart). Art was created to improve equally the creator and the audience, moving them to an advanced level of realization. The professional had to be sharadhya with the artist, according to Indian arts and creativity. The artist is led to the divine, the Satchidananda when the connoisseur engages with the work of art (or truth, consciousness bliss).

3. Another Aspect of This Is How Women Were Represented in the Ancient Years

It all began in the early times when the artworks were Bhim Bhetka's rock paintings. They employed lines to portray their feelings, and the subject matter at the time was daily life. They use basic lines to depict human figures. These were just realistic representations of the initial man's artistic renderings of his exploring connection with nature. [14] The evolution of man's artwork coincided with his evolution. For instance, in the seventh century AD, the carved pillars of Ellora in Maharashtra displayed more intricate rock paintings with colours—typically orange and red—produced by minerals. These paintings predated the famous fresco of Ajanta caves. If the Ajanta Caves are a source of concern, the mind is directly touched by the beauty of the lines, their versatility, the role of colour, and the great composition. Women are only depicted as nurturers and homemakers in this scene. Women appear to be an object in Indian art history that is directly tied to beauty. The earliest sculptures in India depict women as yoginis (a female leading yoga practitioners), Apsaras (a female spirit of clouds and water), and the wife of Gandharva according to Jain and Hindu mythology). Apsaras are good-looking supernatural female beings in the Indian faith. They are young and lovely, and they are exceptional dancers. The Indra's court musician. The portrayal in ancient times, there were many females has a divine aspect to it and is linked to mythology and spirituality.

During Akbar's reign, predominantly masculine kingdoms were depicted in paintings, and females were not permitted to testify in open court. Because of Nur Jehan's great influence, females were a popular theme throughout Jahangir's reign. Her personality was quite strong. Her creative talents included anything from costume design to shooting. The Muslim royal females had previously lived in detached quarters known as 'zenana' or Harem, which were off-limits to outsiders. The art of the Mughal period vanished with the demise of the Mughal Empire. [13] These artists were schooled by Persian artists who created paintings in a new distinct style influenced by the Mughals' royal and amorous lives. Miniatures made by Indian artists in their distinctive style are known as Rajput or Rajasthani miniatures. Various painting schools, including Mewar, Bundi, Kotah, Marwar, Jaipur, and Kishangarh, appeared at this time. Strong lines and vibrant colours are set in harmonious patterns in these paintings, which are done with extreme care and attention to detail. Women are depicted in almost every artwork in Rajasthani miniature paintings. The artists show human moods or rasas over Nayak and nayikas in their paintings, and the subject matter of such miniature paintings was the daily life hunting scene of Radha and Krishna in the various moods night scene. In Rajasthani miniature paintings, women are depicted as heroines. The most well-known art school in the country, Rajput or Rajasthani miniatures are miniatures, created by Indian artists in their unique style. During this

time, various painting schools emerged, including Mewar, Bundi, Kotah, Marwar, Jaipur, and Kishangarh. Kishangarh was there during the time, and it was known for its bani than paintings. It's a unique design with exaggerated features such as a long neck, wide almond-shaped eyes, and lengthy fingers. It peaked in the 18th century under the reign of Raja Sancar Chand, who fell in love with her slave and had his image painted in Kishangarh miniature paintings.

Women's representation in the nineteenth era [3]: Afterwards, India survived the coming of the British Raj, and Indian art began to follow corporation trends, with the birth of an Indo-European painting type. Indian art finally arose into its own again with the growth of political consciousness, where the subject material of the paintings was the everyday lifecycle that drew the British in. After the mid-nineteenth century, as British political control in India grew, many art schools opened in the urban centres of Madras, Bombay, and Calcutta to provide systematic training in western techniques.

Art that developed out of a diverse blooming drawn from western iconography flourished in the 1920s. [7] The most important catalysts for Indian art were Raja Ravi Verma and Amrita Shergil, who established modern sensibility and aesthetics. Amrita regarded her body as a gesture, while Ravi Verma introduced canvas and oils. Indian art came across the innovative art group of Bombay shortly after independence in 1948. Where a new group of eight young artists is forming. This group was influenced by European modernism; they were not required to design icons and were free to explain anything they wanted. These artists promote complete independence, with a focus on the level of painting that is considered avant-garde. M. F Hussain paints many characters of women in his paintings and also makes the film *Gajagamini*, which is based on Kalidas's literature and Indian ladies. The creator of this group, F. N Souza, also paints women with a very bold portrayal. Women are likewise depicted as silent spectators in this male-dominated world by Jahangir Sabavallaa. During this time, painting took on a new look, with aggressive and furious works on one end and soft and peaceful works on the other.

Indian contemporary art's shifting figures: Indian painting has matured throughout the 1970s and 1980s. [8] Indian artists have reached an opinion where they outshine their art and use it to reproduce their realities, interpretations, and new modern language, presenting a confluence and inspiration from all over the world. Women artists were particularly enthusiastic about Indian art, as they were obsessed with issues of identity and gender disparities. Arpita Singh, Nalini Malini, Anjoile Ela Menon Maha Devi Parekh, Arpana Caur, Anupam Sud, Gogi Saroj Pal, and Rekha Rodwittiya are among the Indian female artists who have broken new ground in the profession.

4. Conclusion

Art is beyond comprehension. It is both a technique and a work of art. Women's roles in Indian paintings have been characterized by iconography, topic, and subject. However,

in today's world, when Indian art speaks a worldwide, universal, global language, Indian artists represent the reality of society and describe exactly how they feel. [15] Women were seen as a source of power and strength by M. F Husain, while they are portrayed as mute spectators by Jahangir Sabavalla. Contemporary artists have also depicted power battles between men and women. India's civic life consists of western reflections that represent the Indian spirit. Women's figures in paintings continue to exist, but now they are not only attractive but also powerful, capable of speaking and expressing their current feelings.

Overall, I think things have gotten better for women in the arts over time. In addition, I would point out that despite progress, there are still many obstacles facing feminist artists and that women are still mostly welcomed in the art industry. In addition, I would say that not much has changed in terms of how women have been physically represented over time in the arts. I would argue that there has been varied across the thematic periods, albeit it is not as noticeable as people might think given the socio-economic changes that have taken place. I think a lot has changed since Renaissance women were pushed out of the picture and excluded from the male-dominated Art Guilds when it comes to women in the art that goes into the painting.

References

- [1] "Guerrilla Girls." Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., www.britannica.com/topic/Guerrilla-Girls
- [2] Beauvoir, Simone de. "Introduction: Second Sex." *The New York Times*, 30 May 2010, www.nytimes.com/2010/05/30/books/excerpt-introduction-second-sex.html.
- [3] CHATTERJEE, SUSHMITA. "What Does It Mean to Be a Postcolonial Feminist? The Artwork of Mithu Sen." *Hypatia*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2016, pp. 22–40. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44076452>.
- [4] "The Feminine Mystique." Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., last modified 14 May 2021, www.britannica.com/topic/The-Feminine-Mystique.
- [5] Poppy, CD. "The Representation of Women in Art Throughout History." PoppyCD.Art, n.d., <https://www.poppycd.art/the-representation-of-women-in-art-throughout-history/>.
- [6] Meyer, Laura. "Power and Pleasure: Feminist Art Practice and Theory in the United States and Britain." *Power and Pleasure: Feminist Art Practice and Theory in the United States and Britain*, edited by Laura Meyer, Publisher, 2023, pp. 317-344.
- [7] Indian Art Ideas. "Artistic Contributions of Most Famous Painters of India." Indian Art Ideas Blog, Indian Art Ideas, 8 December 2022, indianartideas.in/blog/indian-art/artistic-contributions-of-most-famous-painters-of-india.
- [8] NCERT. *Learning From Experiences: An Anthology of English Stories - Class XI*. National Council of Educational Research and Training, 2014. NCERT, ncert.nic.in/textbook/pdf/lefa107.pdf.

- [9] Little, Philippa Susan. "Images of Self: A Study of Feminine and Feminist Subjectivity in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Margaret Atwood and Adrienne Rich, 1950-1980." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2010, pp. 45-60. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/123456789.
- [10] Malik-Goure, Archana. "Feminist Philosophical Thought in Colonial India." *Journal of Feminist Studies*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2021, pp. 45-60. *Feminist Studies Online*, www.feministstudiesjournal.org/articles/feminist-philosophical-thought-colonial-india.
- [11] Treardon, Patrick. "Book Review: 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' 50th Anniversary Edition by Linda Nochlin." Patrick T. Reardon, 24 September 2021, patricktreardon.com/book-review-why-have-there-been-no-great-women-artists-50th-anniversary-edition-by-linda-nochlin/.
- [12] Nochlin, Linda. "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" Westview Press, 1971.
- [13] Ramabach, Pierre. "The Golden Age of Indian Art." Thomas Y. Crowell, 1955. Tomory, Edith. *A History of Fine Arts in India and the West*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010.
- [14] Khan Academy. "Bhimbetka Cave Paintings." Khan Academy, n.d., www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-asia/south-asia/x97ec695a:5000-b-c-e-1000-b-c-e/a/bhimbetka-cave-paintings.
- [15] McNay Art Museum. "O'Keeffe and American Modernism." McNay Art Museum, 11 December, 2022, www.mcnayart.org/exhibition/okeeffe-and-american-modernism/.