Chapter: VI

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Though the two artists and their languages of representing womanhood discussed in the previous two chapters are unique, Twenty First century as the most contemporary in terms of tangibility of experiencing womanhood and the representation of womanhood shows more nuanced modulation of the aesthetic understanding of the gendered world. In the present chapter the painting of Chandrima Bhattacharyya is discussed.

6.1 Beginning of 21\textsuperscript{st} Century: Chandrima Bhattacharyya’s Paintings

From the beginning of 21\textsuperscript{st} century the propensity of resistance in gender issues are manifested in Indian contemporary art with more conscious and critical mode. Artists from the different part of India have interpreted various visual dialects in lieu of cultural resistance against all possible social discrimination. Gender was constructed by the patriarchal politics to create an eternal tension between two poles i.e. male and female within the society, which becomes the key factor of discrimination. The discriminating factors of gender are commenced by patriarchy, where male and female became two different classes; men are the dominant class and women are the oppressed class in the notion of gender politics. The politics of gender and its sexual oppositions became a subject of critic in various cultural practices in contemporary era. The perception of \textit{Bisexuality} in context to \textit{Binary Opposition}\textsuperscript{1} has constructed the gendered world. Gender is not only an issue of women studies or feminism. It has wide range of connection with various types of disciplines related to power structures. It is as Gillian Beer writes:

The formation of gender, and its condensation in the literature of the time, is not cut loose from economics, or architecture, or class, or, come to that, animal care. None of this is the single source of authority either; there is no
sole source of oppression, though there are dominant forms of it in class, race, and gendered power-structures. (Beer G. 1997. Pg-81)

Painter Chandrima Bhattacharyya had introduced different dimensions of gender issues through her works, where she projected women as individual with the unique images of self portrait. She tried to touch the intricate world of the individual woman, not by generalizing women as a community, but by making a characteristic difference within the women images. She tried to make an ambience in her paintings, where women images are involved with their own existence and reluctant about the presence of images of men. Rather men are represented in a generalized way, and their monotonous appearance became stereotype in her works. Perhaps the key factor of Chandrima’s painting is to ignore and negate all kinds of discriminating issues within male and female by making a resistance of individual identity against the power-structure of gender.

Shantiniketan based painter Chandrima Bhattacharyya established an individual identity of her own existence in her painted canvases from the beginning of the present century. It has been already discussed in the first chapter of the present study that her canvases are the mirror of self images, where she rendered the fragmented narratives of her private world. Through this private world she manages to put a resistance as an invisible curtain against all kinds of patriarchal invasion upon the personal space of a woman. Chandrima used to execute her subjects in a high degree of intricacy and also with detail and delicate linear representation. The linear details of her works are interlocked with the continuity of objective space that gives an effect of ink drawing to her paintings. Her painted surfaces are also composed in a complex arrangement where plenty of objects are juxtaposed with their specific identity. This complex juxtaposition in Chandrima’s painting carries a psyche of subconscious automatism, which may apparently catharsizes the surrealist context.

Chandrima Bhattacharya studied art both at graduation and post graduation level in Kala Bhavana, Shantiniketan. She has completed her Graduation (BFA) with the specialization in Ceramics in the year 1987 and completed
her post graduation in History of Art in the year 1989. The interchange of the study from graduation to post graduation may have given an opportunity to explore interdisciplinary scopes in her study of visual arts and stimulated her to proceed in the stream of painting in her career later. Chandrima’s first solo exhibition was executed at Chitrokoot Art Gallery, Kolkata in 1993. Where she had exposed her works with plenty of new possibilities. Before her solo show she had participated in the National Exhibition organized by Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi in 1990. After her first solo show she also invited and participated in several group shows, such as ‘Annual Exhibition’ 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998 and ‘Young Faces of India’ in 1994 at Birla Academy, Kolkata, ‘Trends in Contemporary Indian art, part II’ at Art Heritage, New Delhi in 1995, Group Shows at Shantiniketan and Gallery ‘88 in 1996, ‘Contemporary Trends in Art of West Bengal Part II’, Calcutta Metropolitan Festival of Art, Kolkata in 1997, ‘Young Talents of Santiniketan at Gandhara Art Gallery, Kolkata in 1998 etc. The next solo exhibition of Chandrima was held at Art Heritage gallery, New Delhi in 1997.

6.2 Negation of Gender through the Images of Silent Reluctance

Chandrima has exposed herself as an identity specific painter through her solo exhibition at Gandhara Art Gallery under the title ‘See-not-see; Event and Images’ in 2006. This was an important exposition for her artistic career, where Chandrima puts a handful of self images in the identity of an individual woman. Her images became consciously individualistic to omit the deliberate discrimination of gender because she seems to appear as an individual woman, who could not be arrested by the oppression of gendered sex. Rather she should be only focused by her self-presence as an individual personality. Her works of this exhibition were saturated with overlapping images, which are intricately woven in the whole canvas. Her painted surfaces were bright, textured and combined with contrast hues. Chandrima used to draw and paint the forms and images in almost all over the surface with same intensity to each and every inches or corners of the canvas. There was no such void in the space used in Chandrima’s work, which would make a visual relief for the viewer.
The so called combination of void and solid space, which was important in the narrative analysis of the surreal space, is not present in her works. Rather Chandrima’s works have directly opposed such modernistic ideas of composition and they became fragmented with their individual stories within a certain frame by unmatched images. In every possible corner of her painting she tried to put a new image with new feelings and new narration to break the values of wholeness and Meta discourse of the total composition. Chandrima had successfully extracted her personal experiences through the images which are deliberately veiled under the dream like sequence. Through those different and individual images and fragmented narrations, Chandrima enchanted the concept of visual plurality where the discourses of ‘womanism’ are not blurred by a singular androcentrism of gender-gaze.

A painting titled as ‘Passion Flowers and Thorny Thoughts’ (pl.86) executed by Chandrima in 2005 was exhibited in the above mentioned exhibition in 2006. It was painted on paper with water proof inks. This painting is an example of Chandrima’s complex narratives towards the execution of her own self. Here she had drawn the hands and legs in the typical surreal juxtaposition, which are supported by plenty of objects such as a table clock, long fern like leaves, blue hibiscus, a mirror with the architectural images of floor, staircases and an arcade etc. A white head was drawn from the behind of the chair with a surprised look and tentacled hairs which may be signified as thorny thoughts in contrast to the passion of flowers. A large ceramic vase with floral design resembling the Chinese Ming vessels is drawn partially at the left corner of the composition. This small painting is composed in the manner of Indian miniature where several points of perspectives have been assembled with different viewpoints. Here, artist was not much interested to show a total essence through her painting, rather she tried to weave the intricate psyche of different sequences. Though there is a title in this painting as a whole, but that may not be the ultimate for this art work. The title could be considered as a gateway to enter into the painting, and then the painting would start to tell its own story. At the lower part of this painting a crow is sitting upon a blue sofa at the front of the composition. This crow is also managed a separate space into the whole composition to catch the momentary feelings of a sequence, which Chandrima used to do to extract her personal feelings.
Another painting titled ‘Recurring Day’ (pl.87) 2005, could also be taken as an example of Chandrima’s intricate narrative approach. In this painting a man is drawn in front of an open window, who is shaving his beard. The green open window has a pair of wheels to bring the motion of recurring busy day. Chandrima painted here a geometrically designed chameleon with blue and orange chromatic hue, perhaps to show the changing colour of the society and its people in every sequence of life. The blue background shows a cinematographic filtration to segregate the dream from the real world. A man is coming out through a dividing fence to the world of reality from the blue dreamlike background. Making of this momentary cinematographic sequence could be taken as a deliberate shift from the surreal metaphor to the known reality of social life. Numerous designs of linear characters are drawn in black ink with delicate motifs and geometric rhythm. An image of a woman is painted over the central window, which is looking after the whole situation, happening over the surface. The image of the woman with her watchful eyes and her blue green complexion is emerged in the expression of an Indian deity, Kali; the image of Goddess Kali is used here deliberately to denote the inner power of a woman. Kali is seen as a goddess for pro- woman activity from the common women texts to the different feminists’ theories of India. Here one thing is to be clear that the feminism or pro women texts should be read through the perception in Indian context, as westernized feminist readings were denied by many of the women activist of India at the beginning of Indian feminist criticism⁴.

Chandrima is always conscious of her own presence in painting and always tries to watch the painting from the vision of her own retinal world. Perhaps this is a perceptual resistance of individual womanism. Also there is a contrast character in imaging women in her works that she herself is always present in her paintings as a woman and besides her presence as a woman she also tries to omit the differences of gender. It is apparently a contrast character between the images executed at the surface level, but through the process of thorough reading of her paintings another possibility can certainly emerge that Chandrima portrays her own image sincerely as a woman and consciously illustrates the figures of men as the representative of gender.
6.3. Crossing the Gender: A Journey through Self Identity

Sometimes the titles of Chandrima’s paintings speak of radically different tone and try to keep them distinct from the conventional replication of the similar values, thoughts, moralities and ideologies in stereotyped practice of the society. The painting titled, ‘So Far Away From Me or Cuppa Morning’ (pl.88), exhibited in The Zest Group, (Version May 2005) could be taken as the reference of the alienation of Chandrimas paintings. Here she imaged a woman with a cup of tea or coffee in the early morning and the image of the woman may be showing her own portrait. Here she used her familiar forms and images in the complex juxtaposition with architectural design and linear geometries. In many occasion she used a floor like design with black and white blocks. These blocks are also represented in this painting with an expression of a traditional flow of heritage. The chessboard like blocks also demarcates the metaphor of difference through the organization of opposite spaces by the contrast of black and white hues. Cuppa Morning (the painting) shows an alienation of a woman from the taken for granted world through the expression of her reluctant, far away eyes. She is apparently attached with a warm cup of morning tea/coffee in a happy ambience, but her look is travelling away from the boundary area of the painting to a world of emptiness. Her title So far Away From Me.... represents the woman in a lone psyche and her world has gone away far from the made reality of biological life.

The painting ‘Fish Bowl Eyes of the Geisha (pl.89), painted on paper with waterproof ink is also reflecting a meaning of self identity. Here Chandrima again used the black and white blocks with linear perspective to create a depth on the painted surface. In this work Geisa looking at the fish bowl as if lost her all conscious senses. She is alone like the lady of the painting, So Far Away from Me, but she is also confident with her personal world. This is how the artist had tried to cross the limits of gender by denying the biological appearance of men images and by making an ambience of patriarchal existence through the unwanted gazes. Thus the women images in Chandrima’s paintings have expressed the attitude of negation upon the
patriarchal norms to make a resistance against all kind of sexual opposition and gender discrimination.

Chandrima directly imposes her self portrait in some of her paintings, such as ‘DEJA-VU: The Dream or in the Powdery, Amorphous... Hot as Yellow’. These paintings are painted with acrylic on canvas. Chandrima’s style is also highly intricate in context to the technical aspects. From the beginning of the preparation of the ground of a canvas to the end of the paint she uses layers after layers of colour. She used to coat the gold layer over the black layer of the ground. Sometimes she also uses several layers of different colours over the black coated surface to make various textures of colour.

One notable observation in this context is that after the age of forty, Chandrima's search for self identity becomes more exuberant. As she expressed in one of the discussions, ‘she has become very important in her own life and tries to search the self identity through the self images’. Therefore it seems to be recognized that artist herself realized the importance of self identity in her own life, where she only belongs as a being, beyond the discrepancy of gender. She has deliberately alienated herself into a personal world away from the pandemonium of social canons. In a series of self portrait, Chandrima consciously takes some stylized elements from Italian painter Henry Rousseau to create a zoomorphic look at the first glance of the painting. The use of flora and fauna along with the mysterious moon, her paintings show a resemblance with ‘La Zingara Addormentata (The sleeping Gypsy, pl.91) or It Sogno (The Dream, pl.90) painted by Rousseau in late 19th century. Rousseau's primitive vision of nature and flat, miniature like execution of human and animal forms was directly taken in different occasion by Chandrima to transfuse the metaphors of animal and women in other way.

‘Ram Vision’ (pl.92), which is a horizontally elongated painting, is executed in the year 2005 by Chandrima in the medium, acrylic on canvas. Here she has directly imposed the form of a lion from Rousseau's painting 'The Sleeping Gypsy', to use it repetitively to give the impression of the image of three lions over a blue stair case. Interestingly, she did not really use any
reproductive technique to multiply the lion images. Rather she draws upon those lion figures with a free hand in free hand to catch the free flowing liveliness of the images and to avoid the mechanical feelings of reproduction. The central character of this painting is a lying woman whose head is rested upon a gigantic red rose. She is lying upon the grassy field and some huge fingers of a hand are drawn from the upside left corner of the painting with a posture of pointing out towards the woman figure. Though these fingers are not deliberating any sign of sexism, their appearance are notifying the presence of patriarchal doctrine through the thick, harsh, ruthless and forceful gesture. This force is produced by the politics of power, which are controlled by the men, the ruler of patriarchy. The images of Chandrima’s works always spoke against the norms of patriarchy through the various symbols of resistance against power and hegemony. The images of men are not always demarcated through the notion of gender or sex, but through their presence as a carrier of patriarchy. The image of the golden lion is taken from Rousseau’s painting, ‘The sleeping Gypsy’, to create an ambience of power of the male domains against a lying woman whose eyes are deliberately closed. The facial expression of the woman in this painting is very calm with closed eye lids and smiling lips and she is resting her head upon the soft and smooth petals of a flower. This atmosphere of contrast of the painting automatically segregates two different situations in one space. Firstly, the reclining woman has managed to create her own world ignoring the dominance of all kinds of hegemonized practices, symbolized by the pointed fingers and golden lion figures. Secondly, it is her smiling face and the soft petals of the rose have created a calm and empathetic ambience against the chaos of power and hegemony. The way Chandrima has taken the issues of gender is unique and her representation of gender is not essentially conjugated with the norms of sexual oppression. She has crossed the constructed nuances of gender through the resistance of her women images, where the images are used to build their separate identity by ignoring the power and dominance of the man made society.

Chandrima realizes that she became important in her own life at a certain age, which also imbues her paintings with the images of self portrait. In the
painting ‘*Deja-Vu: The Dream*’ (pl.93) Chandrima has painted a standing woman wearing a striped shirt and long skirt with the resemblance of her own portrait. A lion figure is also presented here who has touched the shoulder of the woman with his reddish paw and golden hairs. A full moon is glowing on the top of the sky and a face of angry red tiger is peeping out from the bushy leaves and flowers of the background. *Déjà vu*, the French word means ‘already seen’, is being taken by the artist as her title. The title is focusing upon a dream which perhaps is already seen. This painting is apparently defying the resemblance of Rousseau’s paintings which is already popular with the viewers of art. Perhaps Chandrima did not take the word *Deja-Vu* only in a straight meaning. She wants to show a dream that regularly happens in everyday life. She tries to show the dream not in a particular sense of dream, rather as a trauma of her real life. Hence she paints another self portrait in profile view at the background of the same painting adjacent to the main figure with a smiling expression. Here two same women have executed in different expressions, one is silent and the other is in the voice of joy with her laugh. The eye of the reddish lion is drawn with a white circle to create a vision of penetration that could invade deep into the body of a woman.

It would be quite comprehensible that when a look changes into gaze, then it becomes an invention upon the personal space of an individual being. This delicate play of invasion is executed by Chandrima through the eyes of a lion figure in the painting *Deza-Vu: The Dream*. The important character of Chandrima’s painting is the representation of uncompromising woman image against such invasion of power play. Here the woman is standing straight at the middle of the canvas; her hands are folded together at the back and legs are in the stance of statue. The hands are perhaps deliberately drawn at the back to show that the woman is not at all bothered about any invasion and she did not want to defend anything, because she is not at all insecure. Her reluctant face and stubborn attitude is announcing the presence of a world of women where the gender gaze could merely be able to leave any scratch upon the spaces of women. The image of woman is already aware of the ‘*Deja-Vu*’ dream; therefore she is not vulnerable to
the oppression of stereotype dominance of the gender gaze, rather she is resistant with her offence through the obvious reluctance.

The painting, 'Powdery, Amorphous... Hot as Yellow' (pl.94) is also made in the year 2006, where she executes her self-images in a bright scarlet hue. Here, Chandrima has divided the painted space in different articulations of colour. The painting is having a different character apart from all other paintings of this period. It is neither like the complex juxtaposed composition with the different unmatched objects, nor is a re-representation of the primitive objects and images of Rousseau. But anybody could understand that the painting is executed by Chandrima Bhattacharya for the intricacy of the delicate images and for the arrangement of different sequences in one painted space. At the top of the painting there is a window like area with vertical rods, through which a yellowish blue sky is visible. The right side of the canvas is also painted as a sky, but this sky is brighter and crowded with white clouds. A foreshortened floor, a door and the relying of a balcony is painted at the middle of the composition. The floor is not separated by black and white blocks; it is divided by the horizontal and vertical lines where a woman figure is lying wearing a white sari. The left part of the composition has a chiaroscuro with deep and dark background against a warm yellow-lit space. There is a door beside this yellow space, which is painted in the impression of known objects with intricate use of colour. A dark silhouetted profile face is painted against the yellow space at the extreme left corner of the composition. Some blue blocks are linearly drawn over this profile face which is perhaps giving the suggestion of a window or any open space. The yellow amorphous area is executed as powdery space by the use of blotches of yellow and white colours with microscopic detail. The centre of interest laid at the lower right corner of the composition, where Chandrima has painted her self-image in bright scarlet hue, behind the same scarlet background. Here her face has a lively smile with linear use of black brush strokes. This joyful expression of a woman becomes a threat to the world of patriarchal dominance, which used to see women in the mood of oppression or in the exuberance of sexual appearance. The title of the painting denotes a powdery amorphous space which is hot as yellow and the space could not be bound by any articulation of contoured colour. This nebulous, shapeless,
amorphous space has knocked upon the close silhouetted face, which perhaps is the representative of patriarchy. The window upon this face seems to suggest an option of open vision against the close constructions of male gaze. The sluggish gaze, which is directly opposed by the amorphous hot and yellow and the lively laughing portrait of Chandrima, which has silently posed a threat against all kinds of oppression created through the discrimination of gender.
Notes: Chapter VI

1. ‘A critique of binary oppositions is central to the work of Jacques Derrida (1967, 1978). Briefly, he argues that presence or Identity is constructed only by an absence; women are women only because they are not men and presence is therefore illusory. Derrida deconstructs these binary opposites and problematises the view that identity and truth need to be represented in oppositional terms. Feminists also challenge the hierarchies implied in binary opposites.’ (Humm, 2003, p.22)

2. ‘The term now implies black feminism although in the nineteenth century it referred to those who supported women’s rights. A feminist who believes in womanism is a womanist. Alice Walker provides a full account of womanism in In Search of our Mothers’ Genders (1983). She argues that womanism is not separatism, and that it derives from the expression of black mothers use with female children as in ‘young acting womanish’; that is, like a woman or courageously and seriously.’ (Humm, 2003, p. 304-305)

3. Male centredness, which is the value set of our dominant culture based on male norms. Charlotte Perkins Gilman first used this term to draw attention to male bias (Gilman 1911). Any account which characterizes aspects of women’s lives as deviant is androcentric. (Humm, 2003, p. 9)


5. ‘Radical feminism argues that since only patriarchy defines women by their sexuality, women’s oppression must be located in the institutional practices of sexuality. For example motherhood and rape reinforce the innate and unchanging oppression of women by men.’ (Humm, 2003, p. 195)