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Thus we can say that a vision, a specific point of view, and a unique way of seeing are inherent in Arpana Caur's artwork. "Cut off from access to the high realm of history painting, with its rigorous demands of anatomy and perspective, its idealized classical or religious subjects, its grand scale and its man-sized rewards of prestige and money, women turned to more accessible fields of endeavour: to portraits still life and genre painting, the depiction of every day life" says Linda Nochlin in *Woman, Art and Power and Other Essays*. Arpana Caur also turned to the portrayal of "every day life" but her genre portrayals were painted with an assumed standpoint: that of the virginal blank state compelled to confront an environment of uncertainty. Her paintings might portray a girl, a young woman on the threshold of life, a window, a post menopausal woman, a mother figure, or mother earth. Arpana Caur derives a lot of her subject matter from ancient Indian miniature painting traditions, however, she completely divests these historical figures of their romanticism and reveals them in stark reality.

Arpana Cour's artwork also shows miniature painting influences in the grouping of figures in her paintings. She used that format as an
interrogation of social hierarchies. Women compressed into the body of a horse, or an elephant, as in seventeenth / eighteenth century Rajput paintings, in order to bear the male patron on his sojourn, turn into harsh images of deliberate oppression. The decorative intent in miniature painting of depicting women in a series is turned into a monotony of drudgery and suffering. She turns women from the profile view and they comfort the viewer full face with a sightless, tragic eye, almost an assault of the viewer's senses in their silent interrogation and confrontational gaze. Male figures tend to shrink and diminished in her painting while the feminine grows and expand to assume archetypal proportion. Sometimes armed men crowd into a woman's body, invasive within, and already potentially violent. Even with the expressive distortion of her figures, male and female are sufficiently naturalistic to create a strong emotional resonance. The release of the confined woman is paralleled by the gradual marginalization of the male figure, as the unknown other, slipping from the aggressor into the victim of aggression in some of her work.

Arpana Caur lived a troubled childhood fraught with argumentative, separated parents and the complexity of being shuttled between parents in an Indian society where divorce is not easily accepted, even today. She
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draws on these childhood experiences in her early paintings portraying the isolation of a small urban family. The isolation of the individual is a recurrent theme in her paintings. Isolation in grief, creativity, and even innocence, are seen in her series 'Missing Audience' in 1981. This alienation is more prominent in her later works. She continued to paint the common individual and the spirit and self even when abstraction dominated Indian art. She refused to follow the mainstream and consciously took up the cause of the people. She is primarily a self-taught artist. She first studied sculpture with B. K. Guru before moving into painting. Being a Punjabi (from the state of Punjab, North India), she used Punjabi subjects, such as of women with veils and thick clothing, for most of her early works, as did Amrita Sher-Gil, the most celebrated woman palace painter of the 19th century. However, Sher-Gil’s palace courtyards and open spaces become congested city streets and dark alleys. Sher-Gil’s melancholic figures of the “other” Indian (the poor farmer/merchant/the king’s Subjects), become in Arpan Caur’s paintings the tragic “self”. She painted ‘Women in Interiors’ in the 1970’s, a series of paintings of women hemmed in by an advancing, claustrophobic, violent city. The body, like the city, was susceptible to encroachment and physical pollution. The
eventual threat of effacement was omnipresent. During this time Arpana lived with her mother in Delhi’s crowded Patel Vagar, where draping their body was provided a necessary shroud of protection against the constant flood of bodies on the dense streets. Upon moving to a working-women’s hostel, Arpana Caur’s paintings took on an added aspect of the frustrated inchoate sexuality among the inmates Arpana Caur’s mother drew upon this sense of hopelessness to write her award-winning work Khana-badosh (Homeless).

Arpana Caur, however used her experiences to protect the women in her paintings. She “desexes” her women in order to protect them. Large and strong figures, their earth-like contours continuing the undulation of the landscape around them, women and nature are tied in a circle of perceived threat and uncertain renewal. There is no hint of expressive sexuality in her figures. In an interview with Gayatri Sinha, the reputed art historian and critic Arpana recalls the works of Emily Dickinson and interprets them as “(using)” femininity to drive femaleness out of nature… (endorsing) feminity’s artificial or-unnatural character;…. both of and against nature since spring always loses to decay (and vice versa)”. Another device Arpana Caur uses is the storytelling device of the Pahari
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miniature painters of Punjab. Spatial division dominated in this type of painting and is seen in the diptychs and triptyches of Arpana Caur’s series paintings. She almost always paints in series, as if, for her subjects, just one paintings is not enough. Instead, a series is required to tell her story and reach out to the audience. Arpana’s paintings have very aggressive women as subjects, women who are not ashamed of taking up their own space, space that is rightly theirs. This idea is a direct rebuttal of society’s means of restricting women with heavy clothing and correct modes of dressing, sitting, and general behavior. The duality in Indian myths of constructing acts of play as muted acts of violence became another theme inherent in her painting. She depicted the carnage of the anti-Sikh riots following the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1984 as a personal catharsis, a concern of the community, a question of race and humanity in her series ‘World Goes On’ winning the Triennale award in 1986.

An exhibition by a cultural activist group in a Delhi slum provoked her to draw the elements of the city’s freewheeling mechanical and human detritus as grey graffiti scrawl busily working itself into the background of her series ‘Threatened City’. These figures are placed in various corners of her canvas, as though they are so insignificant as to merit no attention,
thereby reinforcing their strong invasive presence and strangle-hold on the city. The progression from closed interior to billowing landscapes initiate the progression of the crowded city and poverty.

As Mary Wyrick claims that artist Sue Coe is an “artist as cultural worker” the same can be said of Arpana Caur regarding Indian society and culture. Seeing an old Sikh tailor making women’s sari blouses in a dilapidated tin shed, Arpana painted a series ‘The Body is Just a Garment’ in 1990. She draws on the works of Kabir, the celebrated Poet of India, who wrote of the original weaver:

*Sukh Dukh doven Kapde Palthre ay manukh*

(Happiness and sorrow are both like garments. We wear one, discard the other)

In this series, she repeatedly paints an old man (the Punjabi tailor) spinning out sexy garments for nameless warm bodies. Clothes become the life-force, suggesting absent bodies as in the works of Sophei Calle. In the series, small clothes continue to skim across the canvas, but the original concept mutated into hands embroidering the clothes, then into cutting and embroidering a large leaf, symbolic of nature.

From the socio-psychological image of the tailor, Arpana’s canvas
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now embraced the concerns of ecology and a “yearning for an elusive green and the blue of a resting place”. This parallels the growing concerns for the environment by ecofeminists as seen in Hicks and King essay. Arpana is a proponent for a “greening” of Art Education. She is also a proponent of public activism and her artworks function as; protest. Her recent work Where Are All Flowers Gone (1995) is a culmination of several different themes in her works. Symbols of violence become the nuclear holocaust. Commissioned by the Hiroshima Museum, Japan, this triptych contains the progressive symbolism developed by Arpana. The figure is surrounded by the potential for violence-guns, saws, sharp tools-followed by large flowers, full of life force, and finally the blue of release. Arpana has now moved to incorporate more of the metaphysical in her artwork. She has begun to imbue elements of earth, water and sky with greater metaphorical meaning. Frida Kahlo said, band so does Arpana Caur. Her works show freedom, growth, and generation reduced to patches of colour, with the human being constantly striving between apparent reality and aspiration. Arpana’s concerns as an artist, therefore, peak at two extremes: the philosophical yearning of the individual to locate the self within a larger karmic logic, and a passionate response to the “rapidly
changing exigencies of a violent political reality”.

Kaete Kollwitz used a “restriction palette, large forms, and strongly expressive faces” to comment on social events (Chadwick, 560) Arpana, too uses these devices to comment on what she sees around her. Like Kollwitz, Arpana uses “themes of war, hatred, poverty, love grief, death, and struggle” (Chadwick, 272) She develops these themes into “the disjunction between, maternity and motherhood; the one is likely to breed violence, rather than satisfaction”. I believe Arpana Caur is a socially reactive person who paints representational works of society’s crises as outlets for personal anxiety. She abstracts the real, simultaneously blending the personal into the generalized. The viewer’s emotional links with her women figures are strong, suggesting autobiographical content Arpana Caur’s and the viewer’s own life stories. “This is the statement of art as a selfhood, and painting as a means of resolution”. Arpana speaks with the artist’s voice: both private and public.