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CONFONTING WOMANHOOD
IN HER PAINTINGS

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CONFRONTING WOMENHOOD IN HER PAINTINGS

The main theme in Indian art is woman. Perhaps that is why Indian art is sometimes called “female art”. Woman is not just divine beauty or a fantasy, a spirit, an idea but also creator of new life. Motherhood, the ultimate desire of any woman was most effectively used by ancient artists. A full breasted, broad hipped woman symbolized fertility and was depicted thus in Mauryan art, Sunga art and Buddhist art. In whatever was she is represented the fertility aspect is always integrated with the Indian art knows no Aphrodite or Diana but the majesty and mystery of divine motherhood, expressed with wonderful sincerity of feeling and splendid craftsmanship.”

Indian art based primarily on the lines of Indian thinking gives equal importance to woman as to man. The Trimurti (Trinity – Brahma the Creator, Shiva the Destroyer, Vishnu the Preserver) cannot perform their duties without their Shaktis (goddesses). The wife of Brahma is Saraswati, the goddess of learning and wisdom; Parvati, the goddess of purity is Shiva’s consort; Lakshmi, the counterpart of ‘Vishnu is the goddess of prosperity and good fortune. All these mother goddesses have an equally
important place in Indian art.

Besides these divine goddesses there are yakshis (semi divine beings) who are equally important. They represent the ideal beauty comprising sensuousness and fertility. The perfect example is the famous yakshi of Didarganj (now in Patna museum) of Mauryan art. This massive, shapely figure is a perfect example of a classic beauty.

The sensuous woman is fully exploited in the temples of khajuraho (10-12th century). Here woman is shown in various moods and her consciousness of her beauty and power are in abundance.

But the best presentation and attribute to woman is by Ajanta artists in the caves of Ajata. The paintings capture the attention of every art lover. According to art scholars the Ajanta woman is not just a such perfect understanding and homage. ‘The mystical, symbolic, sensual, idealistic are all aspects of the Ajanta woman. Even in other Buddhist centres of art like Mathura, Sanchi and Barhut women are portrayed elegantly draped in sheer fabrics. Artists felt no inhibitions in their portrayal.

Women in Mughal Rajasthani and Pahari miniature paintings are more decorative. The medieval period was the court era. Art was under the patronage of rulers. The “Bharat Natyam’ Shastra classified women in 3 categories: goddess, heroine heroine and courtesan (devinyika, ganika).
The Nayak-nayika theme was popular with artists of the 16th – 17th century. Heroes and heroines were usually taken from popular Sanskrit poems mainly of Krishna and Radha. These paintings depict the whole scene, her eyes, attention – everything – is focused on her lover.

In Mughal art women were presented simply as beauties – bathing women with their attendants were repeatedly painted by this era of artists. In these paintings the status of women is shown in different ways like the royal ladies were normally shown hidden behind a veil (pardha) or within four walls surrounded by attendants. On the whole Mughal paintings portrayed women trying to please the lover and ignored the true sentiments of women which are an integral part of Hindu philosophy.

With changing times presentation of ideas changed and is reflected in the portrayal of women. In modern times the new, realistic and individualistic woman knows her mind, her actual place in society. Amrita Shergil in her realistic portrayal of women became an inspiration for young future artists. She may have been inspired by the Ajanta paintings but she knew the plight of Indian women so she applied her own interpretations. Her “A Group of Three Girls” with their deeply thoughtful sad faces seem to carry fear of the unknown future. In another painting “Women on Charpoy” is the common woman, not the heroine of Mughal or Rajasthani
miniatures. She is in rustic Surroundings, not waiting for anybody, but deeply in her own thoughts.

It is not that modern artists do not paint the ideal woman. Raja Ravi Varma is famous for his paintings of aristocratic bejeweled women. The perfect woman in the parameters of Indian society is a loving mother, dutiful wife and obedient daughter. Raja Ravi Varma has perfectly blended tradition with modernity. On one hand he takes his these from India’s famous epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana or from Sanskrit literature in which he reflects the perfect Indian woman and on the other he takes his inspiration from French neo-classical paintings with sensuously rounded women draped in traditional finery. Who can forget his “Malabar Lady” or the portrait of other modern painters are Nandlal Bose and N.S. Bendre. During their thime Raja Ram Mohan Roy’s crusade aginst social evils, especially the practice of sati (burning of a widow on the funeral pyre) made an impression on 19th century artists. Nandlal Bose’s famous painting ‘Sati is the product of that movement. The artist shows the plight of an Indian widow forced towards self-immolation.

Some modern artists have sketched women being exploited. sensitive artists like Krishna Hebbar, Saroj Gogi Pal, Arpana Caur, Anjolie Ela Menon express their sentiments on Cavas.
When the painting of ‘everyday life’ by a woman assumes ‘man-sized’ proportions, and a wilful dismantling of aesthetics, then painting becomes a mission of redressal. Arpana Caur’s position in contemporary Indian art is unambiguous, her trajectory unbroken. Perhaps among all her contemporaries she assumes the feminine viewpoint to buttress her chosen position as social commentator. Yet, this point of view continually changes and defies Arpana’s placement within a prevailing feminist credo. Most often here is the assumed virginal standpoint, an unmarked tabula rosa, a blank state, compelled to confront an environment of uncertainty. Her female protagonist freely mutates, to appear as a girl, as a young woman on the threshold of life, a widow, a woman past middle age—even Prithvi or Prakriti, Mother Earth herself. In this sense, Arpana uses many of the categories of the nayika bhed poetic and painting convention from the innocent taruni to the middle-aged prauda and completely divests them of romantic nations. This is especially marked since her art has been enriched through a free-wheeling exploration of Indian miniature paintings convention.

Arpana Caur’s identification with the political voice that espouses feminist causes is perhaps one limited interpretation of her work. Arguably, like Kathe Kollwitz, she is a pointed commentator and like Kollwitz uses a
restricted palette, large forms, and strongly expressive faces to comment on social events. Again, like Kollwitz, who was obsessed with “the themes of war, hatred, poverty, love, grief, death and struggle”, Arpana develops on the disjunction between maternity and motherhood: the one is likely to breed violence, rather than satisfaction. Arpana as a socially reactive artist paints apparently representational works, juggles those categories: the social crises becomes a vent for personal anxiety. In her work she needs to abstract the real, even as she needs to blend the personal in the generalized. The question of the autobiographical content is never fully acknowledged, yet the emotional links with her woman figures are strong. This is the statement of art as selfhood and painting as a means of resolution. In that sense, the artist speaks with both a private and a public voice, in the effacement of the first ties the fulfilling cathexis of the second.

Arpana’s means of protecting the woman/feminine force (and she assumes a protective role) is to desex her. Large and strong, she looms like an androgynous Bahubali, earthlike, her contours are akin to those of the undulating land. There is no hint of an expressive sexuality, woman and nature are both symbiotically tied in a circle of perceived thread and uncertain renewal, Arpana recalls herein an analysis on the poetry of Emily Dickinson’.

“She uses feminity to drive femaleness out of nature -----.
Dickinson endorses femininity’s artificial or rather unnatural character; it is both of and against nature, since spring always loses to decay”.

Significantly, doubt and uncertainty on the personal plane are outwardly cathexed as a generalized concern. The individual and the world become interchangeable. The rape of Maya Tyagi in 1979 provoked Arpana to paint this widely reported but ill-addressed incident. The widow of the Chasnala mining disaster as victims and figures of social neglect confirmed her identification of subject, as the political situation of the 1970s become volatile, guns, policemen, and violence as in the series *Custodians of the Law* made their presence. These combine at this stage with her reading of the aesthetics of Basohli painting, a seventeenth and eighteenth century hill school. Arpana’s identification of Basohli for its strong colours and spatial division was especially apt, for among all the miniature painting styles Basohli has a recognizably strong feminine type. Whether *devi* or *nayika*, the woman in this hill school is painted with a strength that belies the demure, delicate *nayika* more usually seen, and Caur adopts the passionate tone, if not the sensual evocativeness of figures in Basohli painting.

The grouping of figures of the miniature format is also adopted by Arpana for an interrogation of social hierarchies. Most often women in
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replica, initiated with the Vrindavan series are used to drive home the social and individual dimension. The Hayanari device of seventeenth-eighteenth century Rajput painting, also seen in Orissa art-in which women are compressed into the body of a horse, or an elephant as in the Gajanari style, usually to bear a male patron on his sojourn—is subverted deliberately as an image of oppression. Still later, the woman figure appears with serial regularity. However, whereas in the miniature format the intent is decorative, in Arpana’s hand the half a dozen women who appear single file, heading out of the picture’s frame to nowhere in particular bespeak a faceless drudgery and monotony. Then again, she turns them out of profile to confront the viewer full face with a sightless, tragic gaze. In evoking the direct confrontational gaze, Arpana introduces a Brechtian note in her work. The references to myth, to the disappearing Krishna, distraught yoginis, and ecstatic Sufis is fractured by the confrontational gaze and its silent interrogation.

Here, in contrast the treatment of the male figure especially invites comparison. Just as the feminine grows and expands to assume archetypal proportions in her painting, the male has correspondingly shrunk and diminished. In the early stages, man appears as the Juggler, in subversion of the Chola period Shiva-Natraja icon (who holds the deer and other life-
forms on his finger tips) nonchalantly tossing about ball-like figures. In later years, the man is transfigured into a singing Baul, an indifferent Krishna, a guntoting faceless policeman, and finally a nameless construction worker or tailor, some times, as in her small gouche works, armed men crowd into a woman’s body like busy spermatozoa, invasive within, and already potentially violent. Even within the chosen form of expressive distortion, the figures are sufficiently naturalistic to create a strong emotional resonance. Notably the release of the confined woman finds a parallel in the gradual marginalization of the male figure, as the becomes the unbroken “other” and from aggressor slips into the state of the victim of aggression in the paintings of 1984 and the nameless worker in the Prakriti series.

Punjabi literature influenced Caur’s artistic perspective, and writers such as Shiv Batalvi, Amrita Pritam and Krishan Sobti were visitors to her home. The literature and philosophy of Punjab contributed to the strains of melancholy, mysticism and devotion that may be felt in Caur’s manipulation of pictorial space. Despite her diverse influences, however, Caur’s subjects remain firmly rooted in the quotidian world of the woman, showing woman engaged in commonplace act such as daydreaming or typing. She is also actively involved in the running of the Academy of
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Fine Arts and literature. Then there is Dialogue, ASSARC recognised writer’s forum.

The repeated motif of clothing in Cour’s work both confirms and subverts the traditional picture of woman. Sinha writes that “The images of women sewing quietly, within the acceptable parameters of femininity is in a way liberated by Arpana, as the woman is placed outdoors, embroidering larger destines. Instead of feminine, income-producing function, it becomes a political comment on women’s productivity.”

On a perfectly ordinary day in 1987, a group of young Delhi artists traveled a couple of hours westwards to seen the dazzling collection of sculptures in the Mathura Museum. The town itself rather uncared, counts its numerous, cash-rich temples as a more important tourist attention than the museum. May be that’s why the unusual Delhi tourists found it hard to ascertain when the museum world remain open. As it happened, when they reach Mathura, it was closed. The day was just starting and nowhere to go, impulsively, the group decided to travel to nearby vrindavan to see a cluster of temples none of them had seen before.

Artist Arpana Caur, then in her early 30s, remembers this spontaneous tour vividly. “When we got off, we were hit by the sight—dozens of malnourished, bareheaded, expressionless figures, draped in
white, bottled the landscape. Many of them stretches out bony arms and begged. They seemed to live on periphery of humanness. I shrank within, felt instinctively repulsed,” recalls the artist, “Most of the woman declared they had been thrown out of their homes after they lost their husbands. Often, 50 paise and a small ‘Katori’ of rice for singing ‘bhajans’ was all they got through the day.”

From this and a subsequent study visit later that year, emerged one of Arpana’s most politically powerful and moving series. ‘The widows of Virindavan, Arpana painted half a dozen of these ‘direct-work’-as she termed them in retrospect. Later, the images reappeared in Time series, when the passage from youth to old age became a preoccupation. The paintings, treasured in collections across the world, are now more commonly seen as reproductions on book jackets.

Clothes appeared to partake of the life force they skimmed across space, fully suggestive of absent bodies (a device familiar in the work of the French artist Sophie Calle) Even as small drawings of garments continued to float across her canvases, the original concept mutated. Women embroidering, cutting a large leaf, like a garment symbolic of Prakriti herself, appeared in paintings like Prakriti and Resilient Green. From the socio-psychic image of the harried tailor, the artist’s concerns
now embraced ecology, a yearning for the elusive green and blue of a resting peace. Characteristically, the woman in Arpana is both prakriti and faceless survivor—a mother pregnant with violent sons, and conservor-who patiently darns and embroiders. There is resistance in there ordinary stances. Arpana’s use of the stitched blouses recalls Zarina Bhimji’s installations of charred children’s Lucknowi Kurtas as a racial memory of the violent Partition. However, the image of women sewing quietly, within the acceptable parameters of feminity—an image challenged by women artist as one of moralizing domesticity—is in a way liberated by Arpana as the woman is placed outdoors, embroidering larger destinies. Instead of a feminine, incomproducing function, it becomes a political comment on women’s productivity. Arpana repeatedly uses the symbol of the embroidered cloth to suggest several interrelated issues—the process of socialization of the young girl and the ‘veiling’ of her body, the cloth as garment and winding sheet, and finally, as a symbol of the transience of life itself. The constant sense of the transience of time registers in her work, “Painting has given me a sense of relative completeness.” says Arpana. Everything else is in a state of flux.

The female figure sits against a torrid landscape of colour, yet another emerges as a symbol of resistance against individualization and
exploitation. Arpana Caur’s images comes through more like a testimony that eulogizes the triumph of time over modernism. Like any passage that exults and exists through its own ambience as well as its philosophical tradition here is an artist who places her legitimate concerns and conflicts in an inspiring manner of a visual aesthetics. She says that “I have never liked the representation of women by Raja Ravi Verma. It is too calendar-like. Women in his works are much like the ornaments they wear. They are either idealized or turned into objects of desire with their clinging wet saries. These are not down to-earth women who work like you and me. His women are decorated like Christmas trees.”

One of India’s foremost contemporary artists, Caur’s work is as well-known abroad as it is celebrated at home in India. Her vibrantly coloured canvases, with their instantly recognizable style that makes references to earlier Indian miniature and folk traditions, employ repeated sets of motifs in their allegorical treatment of a wide range of themes: embroidery and spinning becoming, for example, metaphors of life and creativity, while the scissors that frequently appear also, image the forces that curtail them. In many of the pieces on display, woman is portrayed as the central actor on the human stage, the one who bears life, nurtures and supports it through its long development and ultimately defends it against
the inimical forces concentrated by tragedy, greed corruption, environmental destruction and the thousand other shocks to which humans are subjected. Arpana Caur’s first show in the October Gallery, in 1982, Waldemar Januszezak describes her work as “Sophisticated and intense ......a rare cross cultural success”. Twenty years on, it has deepened to become yet more powerful still, the contrasts stronger, the whole expression more refined.

**The Self and The World:** An Exhibition of Indian Women Artists, held in Delhi in April 1997, was meant to be visual expansion of the published Marketing And Research Group Publication, Expressions and Evocations: Contemporary Women Artists of India, edited by Gayatri Sinha, Curated by her for National Gallery of Modern art and Gallery Espace, it six decades and the work of 15 women artists, painters and graphic artists and Arpana Caur was one of them.

Arpana Caur felt that the concept was criticised only because “It is fashionable to say you are different, that you are a feminist. In fact, the issue of whether not a particular show should be gender-based trivialises the entire effort both of the curator and of the artists. By harping one aspect alone, one tends to overlook that a particular growth and development has been showcased for the first time. Nowhere else did we have a platform
where one could see last two decades of any artist’s works under one roof.”

Also on display were the artist’s personal sketchbooks, letters and which lent a rare insight into events that gave direction to their works, like the letter painter Amrita Sher-Gil wrote to her sister, Indira. Or the one she wrote she said: “I think all art, not religious art, has come into being because of sensuality: so great that it overflows the boundaries of the mere physical.” Or Parekh’s which hark break to a rural childhood now lost in the urban choose represented her works.

The paintings and sculptures exhibited did not always. Tally with, the book since the works were not available. Besides, as Sinha said, the choice was not easy, considering the many artists the country has thrown up in the last 50 years or so. “It would have been impossible for me to represent all that talent, I had to make a selection from available resources, I did according to my understanding of the artist and their art scene in the country,” But, exhibited as they were in 10 rooms at the NGMA, each artist had enough individual space to exhibit works that had evolved over the years. On view, therefore, were voyages of self-discovery for the artist themselves.

Ostensibly, though there was no link between the artists: from
Menon, Sher-Gil Arpita Singh and Malini, the work of Devayani Krishna, Piloo Pochkhanawala, Meera Mukherjee, Nasreen Mohamedi, Madhavi Parekh, Anupam Sud, Milima Sheikh, Gogi Saroj Pal, Lalita Katt, Navjot and Arpana Caur were also displayed. The show was a visual delight towards gaining an insight into a world viewed from a woman’s eyes.

Since every artist was represented by both her early and recent works, every room becomes a mini-retrospective that allowed art lovers to follow the artist’s creative growth and development.

Cour’s recent series on Bihar’s Godna Work was studied in contrast to the materialistic, commercial world; creation and destruction, reality and aspirations co-existed to show the woman both as nurturer and destroyer.

Criticism apart, this exhibition was undoubtedly a milestone; it succeeded in bringing the feminine sensibilities in art and the world as viewed by women. This was a remarkable effort in showcasing women artists who has struggled to achieve their identity in the fierce, male-dominated world of art. It projected a refreshingly different view, far removed from the conservative and, often misunderstood, viewpoint of mythology that viewed women as goddess or male artists who see the female form without its sensibilities and emotions.
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ARPANA ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS AND LITERATURE

To facilitate its manifold activities in literature and five arts, the Academy runs Arpana Fine Arts Gallery (named after Arpana Caur, a nationally renowned artist and daughter of Ajeet Caur) within its premises.

The gallery has two large spacious galleries in which the paintings of eminent artists are exhibited, when required, the two galleries can be joined to create a larger space and ambience for displaying the art works of a group of artists which needs more space to display its works.

While there many galleries in Delhi which later to the needs of the well-healed. Arpana Art Gallery provides space to the young and upcoming artists besides the well-established one. It also provides space, from time to time, to the works of the socially marginalized sections of society (Dalits, tribals workers, etc.) as also the physically challenged. Thus alongside exhibition of well-established artists like Hussain, Souza and Raza, we can see the exhibition held by young and upcoming artist, socially disadvantaged or physically challenged groups and socially and politically committed organisation in Arpana Fine Arts Gallery. The academy charges only nominal rent from these groups. It also provides moral and social support to help them sustain their personal and social struggles. With Arpana Fine Arts Gallery as its nucleus, the Academy also provides
support to craftsmen engaged in traditional crafts like zardozi and phulkari embroidery, tribal Godna paintings of Bihar and tribal sculptures Bastar. In this way too, art is, taken out from the cocoons of the elite and linked with the traditional folk and tribal arts which continue to be vibrant living tradition in India.

DESCRIPTION OF HER WORK BASED ON WOMEN

1. WOMEN IN INTERIORS

Around the 1980s, she felt the need to introduce some linear elements to offset the round organic effect of her figures. That is when Arpana brought in the miniature architecture with its impossible angels and the missing fourth wall of the structure in her series titled Women in Interiors where women lay passively within the walls of their homes.

This series of paintings also plotted a personal graph: Arpana and her mother lived in Delhi’s crowded Patel Nagar, where draping the body was necessary shroud of protection against the constant frottage of bodies on the dense streets. They then shifted to a working women’s hostel where the lingering memory is of a frustrated, inchoate sense of homelessness which inspired her mother Ajeet Caur, to write her Sahitya Academy award winning work Khanabadosh (Homeless).

2. MAY TYAGI RAPE CASE
Significantly, doubt and uncertainty on the personal plane are outwardly cathexed as generalized concern. The individual and the world become inter changeable. The rape of Maya Tyagi in 1979 provoked Arpana to paint this widely reported but ill-addressed incident. The widows of the Chasnala mining disaster as victims and figures of social neglect confirmed her identification of subject. As the political situation of the 1970s became volatile; guns, policemen, and violence as the series custodious of the Law shows; made their presence.

3. MOTHER SERIES

Arpana loves her mother very much. In her ‘Mother’ series she expresses love for her mother. And also shows that the mother is the ladder for the daughter.

4. SOLDIER’S MOTHER

This is one of the finest paintings of Arpana Caur. In this painting she depicted that the woman sits supreme. Within her body, soldiers forms mutate and move like busy supermatozoa. Caur uses this miniature painting technique not with the erotic intent of the original, but to single potential destruction. Shakti here is muted, exhausted, invaded. The eternal womb carries within herself the needs of calamity ‘Eight sons are there of Aditi, who were born of the body’ (Rig Veda) But these are also sentinels to
violence. Their presence here is a requiem for the body (Mother) as well as the hand (Mother Earth).

5. **PRAKRITI SERIES**

Arpana Caur believes that woman and nature are both symbiotically tied in a circle. Women represent the latent force, which has not been explored properly even today. They can counter the challenges of industrialisation and extreme urbanization. Inherently, they have a power to renew and regenerate.

6. **BETWEEN DUALITIES**

Caur’s “Between Dualities” is the physical act of directly interweaving or in compassing Arpana’s own visual vocabulary with the ancient vocabulary of the women artists of Mithila. The direct nature of the intervention is a risky endeavour, but one that Arpana pulls off with cool assurance. Sometimes the intervention is shadowy and flickering, as in Kalpavriksha – 1 and 2 and Prakriti – where her own images are insubstantial and cloud like, trailing a nebulous passage across an ancient canvas.

7. **EARTH AND SKY**

Arpana Caur is the only artist who painted ‘Earth and Sky’ on the demand of United Nations on its 50th Anniversary. 2000 prints were
displayed in India. In the painting, she painted the dream of the labourer for a better world or the dream of a woman for a piece of sky, the stark blue and yellow juxtaposed against each other, and the break for the conventional continuity of colour and image is bold and innovative.

8. **SOHNI SERIES**

Sohni series on the immortal lovers, Sohni and Mahiwal, whose story is now a part of collective myth that is celebrated beyond the boundaries of Punjab. For Arpana the story is essentially of Punjab. For Arpana the story is essentially about a women’s courage in love and the legend’s contemporary relevance that’s important, Arpana says that “Sohni is nearly a take-off point -- backbone of my series -- but reflective of indomitable human spirt of courage, of decision -- making power,”. Elements like water, pats and scissors, featuring regularly on her canvases, turn up here again. “I am obsessed with water”, she confesses. I first used water in my 1984 riots series, as a metaphor for death. But I have also used it to show time and regeneration. I had a collection of paintings on Shoni-Mahiwal on exhibit at the Lalit Kala Academi, where I had shown their love in the Sufi mould.

Arpana Caur has depicted Indian woman as a brave woman in this serious. She has gives a modern look to the painting by using candle light
and traffic light. This series is a perfect example of the blending of modernism and feminism.

**AMRITA SHERGIL – HER IDEAL**

In 1991 Bradford Art Galleries and Museum were presented by a well wisher with two paintings from two Indian Women artists. A small oil by, arguably one of India’s first great moderns. Amrita Sher-Gil who died tragically young at the age of 28 in 1942, and oil by Arpana Caur, a large glowing canvas entitled *Time Image -2*

Sher-Gil’s painting was a portrait of a woman, obviously based on an Ajanta cave painting – moody, mysterious, and curiously implosive. Arpana Caur’s work was much more gestural. Against an infinity of stormy, indigo sky and a white speckled red foreground the figure of an aged woman, ghostly in her white shroud-like, faces a saucer – eyed child. Old age and youth mirror each other, the viewer was confronted by an allegory on the theme of immutability and mortality that was quite terrifying.

The gift of the two paintings coincided with the opening of an exhibition on Sikh culture, curated by Bradford Art Galleries and Museum, called Warm and Rich and Fearless. Since both Sher-Gil and Arpana are of Sikh descent it seemed appropriate to incorporate their works in the
exhibition. The display also included miniature paintings of the Sikh school, woodcuts, rich damascene and gem-studded armour and weaponry, jewellery and phulkaries and baghs, embroidered textiles from the Punjab, in which Sikh women, in particular, excel.

All these objects were intricately worked, the gold Koftgiri inlay on the steel armour, the bejeweled draggers, the laboriously embroidered Phulkaries the hierarchical troubled world presented within the miniatures and even Sher-Gil’s somber earth-coloured palettes showing a dreaming girl. In this exhibition, one was surrounded by minute details. But dominating all this were the spacious, horizons of Arpana’s painting, a perfect contrapuntal device. Although allegorical, it was also modern and it was confident. And in its modernism and confidence, it seemed to breathe a different glowing life into the surrounding works. It is not only brought their richness even more to the fore, but it also further particularised them.

And strangely enough there were all manners of echoes, hints and allusions between this extraordinary painting and the other exhibits. The horizon seemed a nonformulaic reworking of the horizons contained in the miniatures, the flower-speckled foreground reminded the audience of embroidered phulkaries.

And this is how the whole body of Arpana’s work has, rightly or
wrongly, become fixed in many minds. They are not only lucid articulation of our contemporary state through figures that resonate with quite strength and anguish, they also act as mechanisms of release of earlier traditions. The works become agents of empowerment for the widows of Vrindavan, and the other dispossessed. But in the process Arpana compels one to look at her own sources differently. She takes the landscape and female figures of the 17th and 18th century Bosholi Hill School, and by setting them in a seemingly boundless universe, she frees them.

Caur expands and personalises Sher-Gil’s reductive ‘otherness’ editing out any hint of romance or onlooker status in the process. One of my favourite theories is Arpana’s conscious or unconscious witty homage to compositional device of the Pahari and Sikh miniatures. William Archer has pointed out that Pahari artists of the Himalayan foothills found the surfing rhythms of the hookah an extremely useful device in painting, creating as it did its own spatial divides. But Sikhs frowned upon smoking and the Pahari artists who had transferred to the Sikh courts nimbly responded to this by replacing the hookah with the Chatri or ceremonial umbrella. With its slanted shafts and curving brims it too became an important compositional device. In a number of Caur’s paintings it is the woman’s exaggeratedly extended hand, whether she is lifting, carrying or
particularlly embroidering, that immediately strikes the onlooker. The compositional device of the hookah and the Chhatri have been humanized and given life. The extended hand symbolises the strength and the power of the women who appear in Arpana’s paintings. As Gayatri Sinha Comments “An image challenged as one of moralising domesticity, is in a way liberated by Arpana as the woman is placed outdoors. Instead of a feminine, income-producing functions, it becomes a political comment on woman’s productivity.”

Perhaps because Sher-Gil and Arpana arrived together, metaphorically speaking, to Bradford’s collection, they have become symbiotically linked. Sher-Gil is now a legend in India. A major road is named after her in New Delhi. There is a loan on the export of her works out of India. Her glamour and her beauty have created its own mystique.

In a very different way (think God), one can sense the bare bones of legend already forming around Arpana. Most people in India seem to be familiar with various flash points that were defining moments in Arpana’s life. Her parents separation, the move from a suffocating congested area to the grimness of a working woman’s hostel and the fact that Arpana is self taught artist – all these are well known facts. Arpana however, is a very modern protagonist. Her own experience of displacement has given her a
kind of reckless subversive daring.