CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Anjolie Ela Menon, one of the most creative women artists of South Asia, has held over 30 solo shows and several group shows. Her works were exhibited in the fifty years celebration of Indian art at the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi and the Indian Government has honoured her with a Padma Shree. She is influenced by the work styles of the great Indian painter, Amrita Shergil. Shergil epitomized perfect aesthetics, distilling into her very still pictures all that was most beautiful in rural India. In France she shared a studio with a young Mexican painter called Francesco Toledo, and they shared the same problem, even though they had no common language initially. They influenced each other greatly, his sensitive, colorful paintings were replete with mythological creatures from Mexican lore. Few contemporary Indian artists have created a body of work of such beauty and depth as Anjolie Ela Menon over the last four decades. Her paintings reveal an extraordinary sensibility. Menon's early canvases exhibit the varied influences of van Gogh, the European Expressionists, Modigliani, Amrita Sher-Gil, and M.F. Husain. Mainly portraits, these paintings were dominated by flat areas of thick bright color, with sharp outlines that were painted with the vigour and brashness of extreme youth. Some of her solo shows include the ones held at Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi, 2003, 2002, 1996 and by The Gallery, in New York, 1989. Her works were exhibited in the Paris Biennale, 1980 and International Triennale, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, 1975, 71 and 68. A retrospective of her works was held at the National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai in 2002. Some of her group exhibitions include, Saffron
art and Apparao Galleries in Los Angeles 2001 and Saffron art, Hong Kong 2001. She has been an invitee of the British Council, the U.S. Department of Culture and the French Ministry of Culture.

The early paintings were characterized by moodiness, profoundly influenced by Romanesque art. The brilliance of a Byzantine palette and sensibility illuminated her work of the late 1960s and her subject matter included priests, prophets, Madonna's and brooding nudes. The innovative experiments of the mid 1990s with computer aided images were amongst the first in India. The superimposition of overlapping images using computers, photography and collage painted over with acrylic, oils and inks results in an impressive tour de force entitled Mutations. In these works unexpected juxtapositions intrigue the viewer. While the complexity of the structure heightens the element of surprise, the elements of chance liberate the image from its familiar moorings. Nude, serpent, boy and crocodile remake themselves repeatedly, giving birth to unrecognized mutants, which claim a life of their own. Menon has created a body of exquisite crystal sculptures-entitled the Sacred Prism-where the austere precision he finished object is sensuously beautiful. She is also a well-known muralist and has represented India at the Algiers Biennale, the Sao Paulo Biennale, Brazil and three triennials in New Delhi. She has been invited by the British Council, the U.S. State Department and the French Ministry of Culture to confer with leading artists in those countries. Menon has served on the advisory committee and the art purchase-committee of the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, where she was co-curator with Henri Claude Cousseau for an exhibition of French Contemporary Art in 1996. She says that she hardly draws. She thinks she colours and paints lines in reverse. Colour is everything. Its depth or density, translucence or opacity forms the nuances of one's whole creative output. Her work
recently went under the hammer at the Christie's and Sotheby's auctions of Contemporary Indian Art in London. A book entitled "ANJOLIE ELA MENON: Paintings in Private Collections" has been published on her life and work. The above review of the work and style of Anjolie Ela Menon indicates about a number of influences on her work and style and also is the testimony of her excellence in fine arts.

On the other hand the work and style of Arpana Caur is not influenced by any artists. The artistic expression of Arpana Caur is the distillate of a long period of struggle. Arpana Caur went through this entire journey herself, unlike other artists who were given readymade solutions at art school. Having made a practical survey as it were, she chose definite options in her work from 1974 onwards. Her early figures remind one of the stocky, rounded treatments of Gupta aesthetics, which she later blended with influences from Chola bronzes and provincial Mughal styles of the Deccan and the Himalayan foothills. She then went the whole hog into collaborative works with folk artists and ended up evolving a visual expression that draws on folk motifs but expresses concrete present-day concerns as a sort of 'magical reality'.

At every stage, she had to make her own choice of visual language in relation to her own experiences, which differ from the ordinary in many ways. All the environmental, political and social events affected her life and art profoundly. The unconventional nature of the life she has led has helped Arpana keep away from the conventional art and strike out on a path of her own. That is why she remained firmly figurative while most of Delhi artists were steeped in abstraction to one degree or another. The incorporation of abstract and textured spaces in her compositions was a much later development in keeping with her slow and steady progress based on her own
perception and experience. This is the basis of the authenticity of her art and its continuity. She had never been trained as a painter, her works were selected by M.F. Hussain in 1974 for an exhibition at the capital’s premier launching pad, Triveni. Following this success she joined St. Martin’s in London to study art but dropped out early and started displaying her various paintings in the exhibitions. She had her first sell out show in Bombay in 1980 and has worked on the murals on environment with German artist Sohnke Nissan. She has had solo shows in London, Berlin and Ottawa and six international museums already house her collections. Arpana seems to be influenced by miniature paintings very much. We can see the glimpse of modern art in her paintings clearly. She is her own master which is drawn from many different sources. The theme of her painting is closely related to our daily life which has illustrated not only to eminent personalities like Lord Budha but to a common man and the Indian women as well. We can see the images of a labourer, nature and environment also in her paintings. She has emphasized the Sufi saints like Kabeer and Guru Nanak. She never felt easy with the acrylic paints and, therefore, mainly works with oil paints. In addition to oil paints she also uses various other mediums like glass paintings, pencil drawing etc. She started the Etching painting in 1981 on a zinc plate and continued it for nearly 15 years. She painted enormous glass paintings which were displayed for the exhibition in the year 1988. She never compromised with the quality of the painting ingredients and has always used the artist quality paints. Human figures have a special significance in her paintings and hence most of her paintings contain human figures. She prefers making large size human paintings. Most of her paintings are nearly 4-5ft in length which is not influenced by the idea of some other painter rather she has her own style to make such figures. Her figures do not follow the strict rules of body ratio because she has not been trained as an artist.
On the basis of theme of the paintings, these figures decide their ratio by themselves. Her human figures have three main categories: (a) figures closely resembling to human figures (b) very realistic figures and (c) figures depicting formlessness. There is also the global image of a bombed-out public building of Hiroshima that the nuclear threat posed by imperialism has given worldwide significance to, in a work commissioned by the Hiroshima Museum for the fiftieth anniversary of the holocaust. Lately, she has added images from the folk-art of the Warlis and of tattoo artists of the Godna tradition to her repertoire. Later, she shifted the focus of these to her personal contemporary view of things as one can see from the figures of saints plugging in to the Tree of Enlightenment. What really makes them stand out is her unselfconscious way of expressing these realities as she does in her goddesses of the past and present, contrasting the devi figure with that of a female building-labourer carrying bricks. Her art is remarkable in the simplicity with which she presents a radical view of the realities of our lives, using images that we are used to, in a new context.

Since 1986 Arpana Caur has covered a variety of issues related to gender, violence, the inner quest for nirvana and the predicament of the contemporary woman. Some of her recent work feature political incidents, like ‘Heart of Darkness’ which depicts the Bamiyan Budha incident in Afghanistan in 2000. She is highly energetic and wit is never ruled out which makes her heart enjoyable. Her canvas relives the legendary love of Soni and Mahiwal. Soni continues a series on the immortal lovers. Soni and Mahiwal whose story is now a part of collective myth that is celebrated beyond the boundaries of Punjab but for Arpana the story is essentially about a woman’s courage in love. Elements like water, pots, scissors and umbrella feature regularly on her canvas. She is obsessed with water. She first used water in her 1984 riots series as a symbol of
death. Over recent years her works have become more symbolic and certain symbols keep appearing. Colour still dominates her work. She is an artist with her own ideas and agenda and neither influenced easily nor does she changes her expressions with what is fashionable or just to please the market forces. Her ability to always present us with a powerful humanism makes her an acute explorer of the paradoxes and passions of life. Her paintings aware us of her persona and how she sees the world.\(^{39}\)

The work of Anjolie Ela Menon and Arpana Caur, the veteran contemporary women artists, embodies in this thesis truly reflects their passion for the sufferings of the poor people, the life of the Sufi saints, highlighted political and religious issues, corruption in the society and gender violence specifically the sufferings of the women in male dominated society. They have also portrayed the natural beauty of environment and its deterioration caused by human beings. The contemporary art has contributed a lot in projecting various flaws of the society and attracting the attention of the administrators to rectify them.

\(^{39}\)Based on interview with Isana Murti.