A comprehensive study to the approach of image of woman in the works of the ten artists
CHAPTER V

A COMPREHENSIVE STUDY TO THE APPROACH OF IMAGE OF WOMAN IN THE WORKS OF THE TEN ARTISTS

Among the ten woman artists studied some are painters, printmakers and sculptors, each working in their distinctive style and narrative. Despite their stylistic disparities, individual style and personality, they speak a common language through similarity in thought process with the female form as central in their works. While doing a comprehensive study about their creative journey, the evolvement of the image of woman in their works was done.

Delving upon the woman narrative in their creative process they have projected an array of woman images in their respective works. They have depicted the image of woman, not only in the construct of womanhood and of femininity, but in the social, economic and political context as well touching upon the subjectivity of the woman as a whole.

The social, cultural and economic factors influencing the projection of image of women in plastic, visual and textual arts in the Indian sub-continent have determined and affected their projection of the feminine form in their art. These factors have affected women in general and women artists in particular to reassess their image and individuality in art, acting both as a witness and as agents of change with the changing times.

The individuality and the upbringing of each of these artists render their perception of the image of woman in their creative process. All are artists and women too, so their sensibility towards the narrative has a personal connotation as well. They empathize with their feminine projections and at some point their own life and its related events become their biggest source of inspiration for approaching the particular subject. Anjolie Ela Menon, Gogi Saroj Pal, Kanchan Chander, Anupam Sud are all inspired by the body, and enhance upon the structural anatomy of the feminine. All of them epitomize the essence of the feminine beauty depicting a sensuous, erotic nude image as an embodiment of the universality of the female form.
To a certain extent their exposure to the western sensibilities in their formative years has been instrumental in the formulation of their approach to the narrative of woman in their art.

Anjolie Ela Menon’s image of woman is timeless. She approaches her form in an idealized rather than a realistic depiction. The woman form is often projected as soft, sombre, innocent looking yet full-breasted almost voluptuous and erotically rendered. Paradoxically, the expression on the face and the image of the female body are very divergent. The look is naive, as if unaware of its own sexuality, yet the body is opulent. She objectifies her woman, not as an object but as a celebration of the bravura, the spirit of womanhood. The fact that she likes to paint them like that, is interesting and intriguing, as her woman form seems to be an amalgamation of the western and oriental sensibilities, both the influences gathered by her due to her mixed parentage, education abroad and her wide spread travel to western countries after her marriage to a naval officer. Her inspiration of the depiction of Eve and the narrative of Madonna and child were gathered during her art education at the Ecole Des Beaux, Paris. Her blending of the sensuous body with a naïve expression moved her woman forms away from objectification. Her woman forms are an integration of the naivety of the east in which the erotica and innocence co-exist.

Anjolie has remained loyal to figuration and even after so many years has not abstracted her forms. Her distinctive style and idioms, the symbolic allegory that she uses in her paintings, though very personal have a very strong mass appeal. Her woman form has shown consistent evolvement and it has a lot to do with her journey as a woman and as an artist reflective of her own turmoils and tribulations as a person. In her earlier works the youthful brashness, the vigor and vitality are evident in her earlier of the 1960’s and 70’s as she acknowledges various influences on her works. Her earlier nude images are inspired by Impressionism which she did when she was in her teenage years. Despite the influences her distinctive approach is evident from the very beginning.
As life grew on her, the woman form in her paintings became freer, bolder, sensual, and more voluptuous and too idealized to be a real woman. She has depicted the various personifications of woman as and when she has been through those feeling and emotions in her real life. For instance she depicted the ‘nude’ woman form more confidently after her marriage and her experiences of motherhood. Besides her brilliant technique of capturing a Renaissance like effect in her works, using the medium of masonite, her forms surged with confidence of a mature artist. Her women portray a wide array of emotions, reflective of her own growth as a woman. Anjolie puts her own experiences as a young girl, a wife and mother and above all as a woman reflect in her feminine images. She approaches the image at two levels of rendreings- as self reflective of her life and experiences and at more universal projection of the sensuality of the form as a celebration of womanhood. This celebration of womanhood depicts the essence of femininity in her paintings as the Eve-the erotic and sensual as in her work *Juno*, *oil on masonite, 48”x24”*, 1992 and as Madonna- virtuous and symbol of purity as reflected in her work, *November, mixed media with gold relief, 24”x24” the, 2000*. She has used the white lotus as a metaphor of purity, and her glowing tattooed body depicts a serene eroticism elevating the body from its mere physicality to something more divine. The maternal principle as mother and child is an often repeated narrative as is reflective in, *Mother and Daughter, ‘oil on masonite,28”x36”,2004*’ projects the mother with her teenage daughter painted as nude. For her nudity is not for objectification, rather Anjolie Ela Menon empathizes with her woman forms and views her female subjects with empathy. Her approach remains constrained within the academic and traditional constructs, but the innocent, detached expression of her women, the hollowness of the eyes breaks away the voyeuristic nature of the male gaze. The nude body of her female forms is not for savouring or pleasure, but appeals as an actual person. You can’t distant Anjolie’s women as some unknown woman images, but they seem as convincingly the women we might know. “When a woman paints a nude woman, there is more of sympathy, apathy, or
simply rejoicing in the glory of being a woman. It is an identification with a mother, an aunt, a sister or a daughter or oneself,” she says “But when a man paints a nude woman, he paints it differently, he is more voyeuristic… the body is a subject of perception for him, and sometimes the male gaze can be demeaning.”

If Anjolie’s women defy time and age, then Anupam Sud’s bald, nude female protagonist question the viewer/voyeuristic male perception in art. Her graphic prints are woman centric, reverberating with nude, audacious projections of the feminine devoid of any adornments depicting the stark beauty of the form. She approaches the image as a well sculpted woman form, devoid of hair, clothing, embellishments, and peripheral decorations epitomizing the universality of womanhood. Her de-glamorized nude approach

---

556 Personal interview with the artist, New Delhi, 2010
to the woman image in her paintings is a departure from the iconic representation of the feminine form as she explores the feminine sensibility with a wide plethora of emotional narratives. This approach of depicting the muscularity, the tactile form comes from self, as she takes her own body as a point of reference. Her inspiration to depict the perfection of form is suggestive of her childhood memories of her father’s athletic body. The muscular perfection, the anatomy and the structure of the body inspired her to delve deeper into exploring the representation of form in her art.

Anupam questions and searches for a woman’s identity via her art as a woman and as an artist. Her pictorial language addresses the paradoxes, showing the woman as an epitome of inner strength yet depicting the vulnerability of the body. Her depiction of women as bald and bare of feminine embellishments was a conscious effort of subverting the image and departed it from its conventional image. Her narratives delve deeper into depiction of human relationships as they exist and also change within the social and cultural construct. In the 1970’s she started with a more de-constructed and abstracted approach to the body using frames and blocks to divide her compositional space. This approach was influenced by the feelings of alienation she felt while studying printmaking from Slade School of art, London. In her work from the 1980’s Anupam delves into the predicament of women, questioning her identity in the present socio-cultural scenario.

Anupam Sud’s blatant explorations on the issues of sexuality make her appear to be a feminist, but her narratives don’t vouch upon feminist issues rather they are inter-woven with complexity of relationship, which becomes her major focus of pictorial language for the next two decades.

Her approach to the image retains the tautness of the muscularity of the form, but the focus on her subject tends towards the sensitivity of socio-psychological repercussions on the women with regards to the projection of

---

557 'He was a foot ball player and a body builder and played for the Shimla Youngs team of foot ball.'
558 'She does not like to be termed as a Feminist. She does feel strongly about certain issues, but at the same time vouches for equality in gender and has never felt the need to march against men or such issues.' (Personal conversation/interview)
their body. ‘Emancipation’, etching on paper, 49cmx59cm, 1988, is a trypitch depicting three different women placed in three separate frames. In the centre is the nude woman looking engagingly at the viewer/voyeur as she covers her body from the male gaze with her hands. In the left frame, the woman looks intently from within her veil. The frame to the right, the woman stands in side profile, engaged in her own thoughts. Indeed Anupam questions the issue of the gaze as primarily the male prerogative. The women placed within the frames allegorically defined their contained spaces due to social and cultural divergence. The psychological implications of a woman seeing her own body through the eyes of the society leads to the woman creating their own mental barriers about their bodies.

Fig. 172 ‘Emancipation’, etching on paper. 49cmx59cm, 1988
Her muscular approach towards the form continues with the image as the central focus of her etchings. The black and white tonality of her etchings provides depth to her narratives and at the same time also removes all disparities within the different forms, making them more harmonious and universal.

Her asexual female protagonist, though depicted provocatively, seems distanced, unaware of the sexual implications of the body. ‘A nude is always related to latent or overt sexuality, but a nude in my works is never invoked to merely represent sexuality- she has a larger consciousness. As a growing up girl, one is often subjected to the gaze as an ‘object’, as constantly being judged. As I grew older, I became comfortable with the body. I came away from being an object because of my own awareness of the undercurrents of ‘gender politics’. I became an observer of this game of sexuality, started enjoying it, and also realized how important this game is for an “inhabited” middle class. All this experience creeps into my work…’

Anupam like Gogi Saroj Pal tackles social, political and cultural issues in her art in such a manner that it has a universal appeal. ‘Gogi and Anupam use their art as a way to critique contemporary conflicts and values and raise questions concerning that which are usually ignored, particularly those concerning gender.’

Gogi Saroj Pal’s works like, ‘Kamdhenu’, ‘Swayabram’ and ‘Naiyka’ all done around the early 90’s question the identity of a woman. She narrates the paradoxes that exist in our social system regarding a woman’s role, her identity, her desires and her very existence as a woman. In her earlier works, we find a commune, a dialogue between two people, man- woman, man-man or even woman-woman. She probes the human bonding, the communication among persons, the tensions in relationships. She enjoys probing the deeper layers and finer nuances of relationships in various configurations in some very

---

559 Rastogi, Akanksha, ‘In conversion with Anupam Sud cit... op. p. 124 [Art and Deal Magazine].
compelling etching done by her in the late 90’s. Her works from 2000’s onwards are more of a communication with the inner self. As Sud grown as an artist and as a woman and so do her narratives. From depicting feminist issues to social and gender concerns, she delves deeper into the psychological realms of the mind and uses the mirror and mask as metaphor for introspection and as camouflage to hide our true feelings. Much like Arpita Singh, Sud too liberates her feminine from the male gaze by showing her woman as fat and old with flabby bodies as in her ‘Mohini Maya’, series of 2000.

As Sud has grown as an artist and as a woman, her approach to the woman image still remains as the nude, athletic body, but it is more feminine now with long flowing hair as compared to her earlier bald women. Their passivity is gone and her woman now looks straight at you, epotimising a new age confident woman.

Her latest work resonates with changing perceptions as she deals with the ‘reversal of roles’ in her pictorial language. Now Anupam’s woman move away from the image as ‘objects of desire’ to being the ‘one who desires.’

“... She offers herself and is happy to be an object at one level, and at another she exhibits the trophies on the wall, her conquests. She poses as a winner ...

Anupam too has probed the subjectivity of desire and desirability.

Sud, through her art, has re-claimed and re-define the woman’s body, not as a passive recipient but as a person with feelings, thoughts and desires. Her woman is more than just a body. She is a complete person.

Gogi Saroj Pal much like Anjolie and Anupam approaches the image figuratively. She projects her woman as beautiful, full-bodied sensuously erotic woman .Her women are depicted desirous and are not ashamed to desire. Gogi’s woman is a complete package, a quintessence of compassion, struggle, love and desire projected in various nuances of womanhood. Woman in her paintings is depicted as the mother, the passive victim, the embodiment of the

561 Personal interview.
562 Ed. by Sen, Geeti, cit ... op.pp.102-3
mythical and the mystical powers, and as yogini. While objectifying the body to a certain extent, she stresses upon the element of ‘being the woman’. Her half-woman, half-cow image as the ‘Kamdhenu’ and half-woman, half-bird as the mythical ‘Kinnari’ bird emphasizes the narrative of the subjugation of women and their desire to have more freedom.

Her approach indeed is very radical and thought provoking as while expressing the sensuality of the body, she searches for the identity of the woman.

In the 1970’s while searching for her idiom, she was not satisfied by the western influences upon her narratives, and looked eastwards for inspiration from the Vedas and mythology and found her metaphors for her narratives in art. Gogi’s series on the commodification of women, as the target of male gaze in the commercial world of advertising products emphasize the woman form has been used as an object for the male voyeuristic gaze.

Fig. 173 Hathiyogini Shakti’, gouache on paper. (s.n.m) 1996
With strong lyrical lines, she approaches the body in a traditional context as stylized with eyes and lips being very prominent in her narratives. Her forms question the traditional depiction of women in art. She has reformulated the iconic representation of the idealized woman form, with a new image where she seems to celebrate womanhood and transform the previous concepts that subjugate the definition of women. She has defined the feminine in her visual language, unlike Anjolie, Gogi’s women are happy, wide-eyed even in their limited space, as she enfoldes and envelopes her woman forms. This approach is a metaphor for the vulnerability of the body, but her strength and her desire comes from her expression. Her woman is the quintessential woman in the personification of a nayika, a Kinnari, a kamadhenu, a yogini, and the most recent being the embodiment of nature blooming within the woman herself. She personifies the essence of womanhood and celebrates the feminine as what they are- as ‘Being the Woman’.

If Gogi Saroj Pal depicts the mythic imaging of the feminine using the synthesis of the female body in the bird/animal form, Kanchan approaches the female body as a point of departure, as a means of defiance. She depicts the female body subjectively and her female torsos invite attention. She identifies with the body that she paints as ‘her body’ for her work is highly autobiographical and the narratives grow along with her own growth as a woman and as an artist. She does not represent her woman as subtle demur images like Nilima Sheikh, neither represents them as a metaphor of nature or fertility as Madhvi Parekh does in her contemporized folk style. Rather her feminine projections are more attuned with Anupam and Gogi’s forms. Kanchan has developed her idiom and her style is identified with depiction of evocative frontal nude forms.
With headless monumental Torsos, Kanchan embodies the universality of the woman form in her art. Like Anupam Sud, her female forms are often bare; devoid of all embellishments personifying the essence of the feminine. The idiom that she has developed of the woman image is a nude headless, armless torso. Despite being a mere torso, it is not rigid in formulation, rather emits the timeless reflection, the quintessential image of woman since eternity. Projected nude but not vulnerable they seem to define the innate feminine strength with its universal appeal as not being confined to any geographical, cultural or sociological boundaries. The feminine strength emulated in the bold simplistic torso image is also reflective of her inner strength. They are auto-biographical reminiscences of her own self, her journey as a daughter, a single mother and as a woman.

Her forms grow along with her own growth as a person and as an artist. Her woman images like Arpita’s women are her own reflections as they change and age with her.

Arpita Singh with her personalized idioms and metaphors has broken the ideal feminine concept of beauty by representing her women as “real” with aging bodies, sagging breasts and maligned bodies. She has taken the female form out of the construct and confinement of beauty. In her paintings she projects a woman’s perspective towards life, imbibed with ordinary household objects, placed within the domestic paraphernalia, busy in her everyday life routine, which becomes a large part of her life. Arpita weaves a narrative which is somewhat naïve and surreal. Her use of objects like aeroplane, ducks bunches of flower, bushes, pots and pans, telephones, household furniture, child-like graffiti on walls and over-crowded roads, snarled traffic, guns and militia depicts the dangers of contemporary life. Her compositional format is
inspired by the miniature style of painting in the manner that she uses narrative in her paintings. The Bengali folk embroidery style of Kantha has also inspired her to use a lot of textures in her works. Her style though figurative, is very modernistic in its approach.

Arpita has approached her woman form as nude in many of her works, more so to portray the vulnerability of the body, rather than to eroticize or to show the sensuality of the body. The impending dangers of the urbane life are of concern to her. Her approach to the image changes with her own growth as an artist and as a woman. Her thematic approach for female forms change from a vulnerable child bride to a young woman in a floral dress as in her earlier works to a completely nude woman dominating the centre space celebrating womanhood in her works of the last ten years. Along with womanhood, she delves into the narrative of motherhood with woman and girl child series of works. In the gesture of mature woman holding a young girl child as in the painting ‘Woman with Girl Child II, water colour on paper, 14”x20”, 1994’, she depicts a larger than life nude woman form.

Her approach to the same theme of mother and daughter are entirely different in rendering and formulation from the style and approach of Anjolie Ela Menon.

Fig. 175 ‘Woman with Girl Child II, water colour on paper, 14”x20”, 1994’
This work is different from the earlier one as the woman, the mother holding the girl child is shown old with sagging breasts and huge bulky body. The child is not an infant, but a young girl. The whole painting is symbolic of the mother daughter bond, the relationship that Arpita shares with her own mother and perhaps now with her daughter. The three profiles of men on the side frame could be images of her own father, whom she lost in her childhood. The airplanes could be metaphors of a journey and perhaps a displacement of moving to Delhi during their childhood. The jars, vessels, teapots are also a symbolic reference to her childhood memories. The narrative of these women and girl-child series of works are symbolic of conflicting desires and perhaps reminiscent of Arpita’s own emotional trauma as a young girl, when she lost her father and her mother had to rear her two small children all by herself. In the gesture of a mature woman holding a young girl child. It seems ‘...the girl-child who is already herself a woman, the goddess is actually transcended. Revived from private oblivion, held by her fierce and benign mother, the daughter grows up, she faces life, she endures...’

The varied nuances of a woman change with time and with Arpita herself. She addresses the issue of the vulnerability of the female body in her creative process and in the modern contemporary life, the safety of women is a matter of concern and even the Devi/ Goddesses are not safe. Her works critique the dangers, the unsafely modern urban life, with the women not even safe in the interiors of the home. The goddess of today is not a symbol of strength, rather is vulnerable herself, and in another image of Durga she has rendered the figure of the goddess in a white sari with a gun in her hand instead of the trident as she is evidently seen.

But the woman in her most recent work gives us cause for celebration, for the free spirit with which Arpita has painted them. Arpita’s woman shown as tall, large yet with a tenderness has discarded her clothes and shown nude in her paintings. Arpita seems to have not only discarded the woman’s clothing but also her peripheral metaphors and highly textured surfaces which she so often has been using in her paintings to bare backgrounds. Arpita is able to re-

563 Kapur, Geeta, cit. op. p.50.
invent her own pictorial language and in the process is able to subvert the image of feminine in her paintings.

If Anjolie’s women remain timeless, then Arpita’s women age with time. They become the middle aged woman losing her beauty as the body becomes flabby, the breasts sagging, the face wrinkled, and the hair line receding and the body dissected perhaps due to some surgery. Her concerns for the women are clear, whether it’s the safety of the woman or the vulnerability of the body, her concerns become like a social commentary. As she ages, so does her women in her paintings. Her older woman forms are often reminiscent of her mother who had been the anchor of the family and a huge source of inspiration for her. Arpita Singh projects artistically the paradox of the ageing body and the residue of desire within the woman. ‘My women are more real, more believable and not some beauties with perfect bodies for adornment’.

Kavita Nayar approaches her woman images are very suggestive, linear and sensually entwined forms. She delves more towards the androgynous forms and projects the unification of male and female energies in her works. Representing the poetic and the sublime, her works are self reflective of her pain. Using water as her leit-motif, she correlates the power and ability of water to create or destroy as similar to the power of the feminine abilities.

Being a printmaker like Anupam Sud, she delves more into lithographic prints. Though she uses a vibrant colour palette, yet there is a hint of melancholia in her narratives. The inspiration to use lyrical formulations in her paintings is due to her being a trained Kathakali dancer. The pain and pathos co-exist in her works. The woman form evolved very subtly in her earlier works and was suggestive of the unification of the masculine and feminine.

---

564 Personal interaction with the artist at her residence, 2006
energies as she would entwine her forms very suggestively. An instinctive use of her daughter’s photograph in one of her prints depicting the death and gloom of Tsunami became prophetic for her, with the untimely death of her only daughter. Kavita’s works of the last few years are her catharsis of internal pain, as her woman form surfaces in the shape of her daughter’s radiant face, glowing within a flower. She re-lives the memories of her daughter by making embryos growing out of flowers. Her art has liberated her of her emotional trauma and pain. She started painting with a more abstracted approach towards her image, but her recent works being a self-reflection of her emotional catharsis via her art have images of the smiling face of her daughter blooming among flowers and in nascent forms.

Madhvi Parekh has internalized the cultural and traditional ethos, through the folk narrative in her paintings and has projected the woman form as an embodiment of nature and most appropriately as a part of nature herself. Madhvi’s woman forms are not overtly feminine, like perhaps the works of Anjolie or Gogi or Kanchan.

Fig. 177 ‘Durga’, 60.1”x72”, acrylic on paper, 2005
Her women forms are most of the times are just a profile in one compartment of the painting, sometimes they seem to be springing out of another form. She has used woman as a metaphor with the fertility and the creative abilities of nature believing in the creative power of woman. Her approach is inspired from the folk but her vocabulary is very contemporary. As unlike the folk artists, there is a continuous growth, change and adaptations of contemporary influences in her art. Madhvi has projected the feminine as an embodiment of the powers of the goddess ‘Kali’, and ‘Shakti’. In doing so she has re-invented and re-discovered the image as per her own pictorial language. Her goddesses are more human, more empathetic depicted with the iconic stare, an expression which is oft repeated in her images, making them more in awe of the natural forces, rather than they themselves being looked at with awe and reverence.

Like Madhvi Parekh, the works of Mrinalini Mukherjee, too resonate on a different note. Madhvi uses the folk as her inspiration, but Mrinalini uses a very unique medium of hemp and fiber to put across her sensibilities. Her projections are monumental, almost mammoth sculptures hanging with fluidity projecting the fecund, the erotica. Her approach to the woman image breaks all conventions, presented in a manner totally new to the sensibilities in the art world. Her woman does not surface overtly as her sculptural forms invite attention. They compel the viewer to think, to introspect as they articulate a different meaning. The forms evolve with a painstaking process of twisting, turning, knotting of rope, sisal and hemp. One piece of work of art by her sometimes would take more than a year to complete. Mrinalini patiently uses the technique of macramé to evolve her forms. Reactions to her works are as varied as complete awe to the sheer power and exuberance that her free standing and sometimes hanging forms elucidate.
There is a sensuousness, a tactile feel to her three dimensional forms. Taking inspiration from the ancient Indian art, in which nature and human co-exist, her phallic forms celebrate the fecund abilities of creation. Mrinalini Mukherjee explores the form at another level, making monumental, erotic almost fecund representations interwoven magically in hemp and wool. By this overt almost erotic representation, she does not objectify the form; rather, she too uses it as an allegory of nature and human beings co-existing together. Both have their creative and destructive abilities which need to be addressed and understood. Her art amalgamates the vegetation and the human, using it as a metaphor for the creative, regenerative power of nature and humans.

Mrinalini has been successful in inventing her pictorial idiom, creating a medium like rope and hemp as the creative expression, taking the contemporary Indian art to new dimensions.

Nilima Sheikh’s women on the other hand are formally subtle projections placed within the four walls of domesticity pondering upon the issues that circumscribe the role and life of women in the social and cultural construct. Drawing inspiration from miniature and scroll paintings and using text as part of her narrative, she uses a lot of layering in her paintings. Woman as a subject does not take centre space in her works like those of Gogi or Kanchan Chander but appear lyrically interwoven in the narrative. She uses a very diminutive scale for her woman narratives, which is not consciously about their stature, but stylistically, her works evolves in layers of narratives and hence her woman is a part of the larger whole of her composition. Her woman is not the protagonist, neither the idyllic beauty with perfection of body as in the image of Anjolie Ela Menon, but are ordinary women indulging in their
daily chores, which is a major part of any woman’s life. We see Nilima’s women as sweeping floors, washing clothes, cutting vegetables, bearing and rearing children.

She does not idealize her approach, rather simplifies the form, moving away from the overt physicality. Her inspiration is the miniature paintings, but she does not enhance the image, rather makes it very subtle, almost poetically rendered in her creative process. Making a social statement by expressing issues like dowry death and subjugated role of women, she has questioned the existence and the identity of woman as her earlier ‘When Champa Grew up’ series of works. She expresses concerns about gender, equality and feminity. Her approach to the projection of the image changes and evolves with her own growth as a person and as an artist. The changes occur in her projections of women as coy victims of destiny to celebrating the procreative abilities of the feminine in her ‘Birth’ series. She is perhaps the only woman artist to address the narrative of maternity and project the process of birth in her narratives.

Despite depicting an issue which has always been depicted allegorically in Indian art, she applies a very simplistic approach. Her nude woman shown in the process of labour, is not erotic or sensuous, rather Nilima eludes idealization of either the body or the narrative. This was a conscious effort of the artist to develop an idiom that departs from the conventional image so as to liberate the form from voyeuristic gaze.

![Image of a woman](image_url)

*Fig. 179* ‘Speaking of Akka II, tempera on Sanganeri paper,(s.n.m) 1999*
Nilima Sheikh is very inspired by the writings of Mahadevi Akka, the fifteenth century Bhakti poetess, and in depicting her nude image, she liberates the woman from the social constraints. Her bold, nude projections of the yogini are a celebration of womanhood. Nilima prepares the surface of her paintings very meticulously and uses casein and tempera to have a wash like effect in them.

Arpana celebrates womanhood in her paintings, in a subtle yet forceful way. She delves more upon the inner strength and pain of the women, rather on a bold and explicit narrative. Depiction of woman form has been her favourite subject of narration in her art, a theme which she relates to very closely. The women in her paintings are based on Arpana’s childhood images of her mother and sometimes also reflective of Arpana herself. Caur often works and reworks a particular theme or composition of paintings, leading to a series of paintings, or sometimes the forms or metaphors repeating over a series. The gentle and lyrical act of sewing, weaving and spinning is a recurring motif in several of the paintings and also the scissors; arrows and scales as a metaphor are repeated oft in her paintings. The scissors representing time and the goddess of destiny, arrows represent the impending fate and scales as the measure, of love, of time. Traffic lights are the symbols of control and order and also obstruction in the present context. There is no hint of overt sexuality in her approach to the image of the woman. Arpana simplifies the form and many times just defines the body with linearity of colour, amalgamated very aesthetically along with the background colour. She uses large canvases with sharp contrasting colour palette to bring about a dramatic effect in her paintings.

Her women are neither idealized nor beautiful; rather she has depicted her women symbolically, co-relating them with nature. As both women and nature, she feels are at threat in the hands of men and mankind.

Her forms, especially the woman form do not conform to the realms of beauty. They are often supple, sometimes muscular and androgynous, not conforming to the ‘aesthetically beautiful’ depiction of the feminine as in the Indian art. She uses repetitive forms in her compositions inspired from the
miniature paintings. Her forms often mingle with the painting, sometimes appearing with bold and stark lines with some parts just becoming translucent, projecting the whole theme in a different, somewhat spiritual level.

![Image](image_url)

*Fig. 180 'Prakriti', 4 x 4 1/2 ft, 2008*

She paints the eyes with utmost care, adding a distinct hollowness in them, which adds to the melancholic expression and also gives a distinct stylization to her paintings. Her women do not conform to the naiyka attributes as per the Rasa theory of the Indian aesthetics as she re-defined the legendary ‘Sohni’ in her paintings. Inspired by the miniature painting by Nain Sukh, Arpana epitomizes the Sohni as “the woman who takes the plunge”. Any woman who does that is Sohni in her own right.

Arpana Caur de-sexes her feminine, representing a philosophical narrative moving beyond the body and treating the body as a garment,
searching for the real purpose of our existence, which as per her goes beyond the body. Arpana use the river as a metaphor in her compositions. The river as a metaphor of passing time is used in the paintings ‘The World Goes on’ on the 1984 riots and river again has a different allegorical meaning in her ‘Sohni’ series in 2000. Time stands still in Arpana’s paintings as she defies time and space amalgamating the abstract and the realistic with articulate blending of form and colour.

All the ten women artist in their diversity of approach and narration have been sensitive to the social paradigms circumscribing the identity of woman and the vulnerability of the body. If Arpana Caur was disturbed by the social paradigms and painted burning issue like ‘Rape of Maya Tyagi’ and the predicament of widows in her ‘Vrindavan Series’ and Nilima Sheikh made a series of 12 works on the issue like dowry death in her paintings ‘When Champa Grew up’, Even Kanchan could not isolate her narratives from burning social issues and painted about the rape of a nun, titled as the ‘Gajrola case’ . Anjolie too made a series of works on the commercial sex workers titled ‘Kamatipura’. Gogi and Anupam too raise issue of the commodification of the body of the woman vouched as a product in the market.

All these women artists, despite their individual thought process, individuality of style and approach have collectively used the inspiration of their own life, events and experiences as a woman to re-define their approach to the image of the woman in their art. While re-interpreting the image, they have taken inspirational references from the myth, mythology and philosophic sources to depict the image of the feminine divinity. In its various personifications, be it the depiction of Shakti, Kali, Durga, Hatyogini shakti, Dharti, Kali Noveaue or Yogini, all these women artists have projected the image as a celebration of the essence of womanhood, the quintessential woman of today.