
Volume 18

Issue 1 *Empowering Future Generations of Women and Girls: Empowering Humanity: Select Proceedings from the Second World Conference on Women's Studies, Colombo, Sri Lanka*

Article 5

Nov-2016

Signatures of a Collective Self: A Study of Select Contemporary Women Artists from South India

Lakshmi Priya Daniel

Follow this and additional works at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Priya Daniel, Lakshmi (2016). Signatures of a Collective Self: A Study of Select Contemporary Women Artists from South India. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 18(1), 52-72.
Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol18/iss1/5>

Signatures of a Collective Self: A Study of Select Contemporary Women Artists from South India

By Lakshmi Priya Daniel¹

Abstract

This article attempts to reclaim the status of women artists of South India by a process of recovery and inclusion. The aspect of their marginalisation from mainstream art and subsequent disappearance from the annals of Indian art history has been examined. Further, the reasons for this disappearance are investigated in terms of the overarching notion of gender, embedded in social and cultural parameters. The article locates the manner in which these women artists are affected by familial, institutional and social systems and explores the experiences of the women artists in terms of their multiple roles. This can lead to an understanding of the negotiated spaces of private and public domains, which form the paradigms of art practice and are crucial to the expression of women artists.

The critique seeks to register the presence of women artists in South India (which is comprised of four states, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala) from the twentieth century and their contributions. It essentially offers insights into the roles played by the artists and their status not only in terms of gender but also culture and identity and examines the transformations achieved by women artists in South India over the years and the position they occupy. Though Indian Art has grown in international stature and has gained a global visibility today, women artists remain underrepresented in many areas such as major curated shows, international expositions, triennales, and wards of international, national and regional prizes and scholarships. At the national level, South India continues to register minimally in the mainstream of modern Indian art. The study observes how the women artists' existence in the art world has largely been shown as secondary to that of their male counterparts and that their expressions were not considered 'good enough' to be included in mainstream art.

Keywords: women artists, marginalisation, invisibility and inclusion, public domains, Indian women artists

Introduction

India has long remained a nation in which past and present enmesh to create a culture which at best is a shimmering mosaic and at worst a fragile mirage. In India the divide between the north and South is also an intangible reality which pervades almost every field and aspects of everyday life. The arena of art history ascribes to this cultural and social divide only in a linear, disjointed

¹ Lakshmi Priya joined the Department of Fine Arts, Stella Maris (Autonomous) College, Chennai in 1996 as a lecturer. She has also served as guest faculty in institutions like National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) and Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Chennai. She received her doctoral degree in 2013 from the University of Madras. She has published several articles and has co-edited a book. Her areas of research interest are Ancient and Modern Indian Art, Gender and Art. She is a practicing artist and has participated in group shows. Her works are in private collections in India and abroad. Email: riyadaan@gmail.com

manner. When the idea of a modern nation was born with independence being wrested in 1947 and freedom being valued highly, artistic practice too reflected the transition from a monarchic affiliation to liberated thinking. However, patriarchal constructs ensured that women were not acknowledged as inheritors of an artistic tradition. Women artists who emerged in new India were far and few between and often succumbed to a secondary status to that of their male counterparts.

If this was the situation at a national level, in the Southern region of India which remained insulated from the rest of the nation to a certain extent, the art scenario was even more markedly differentiated with women artists largely remaining ignored and invisible within India and by the global art world. This article attempts to reclaim the status of women artists of South India by a process of recovery and inclusion. The aspect of their marginalisation from mainstream art and subsequent disappearance from the annals of Indian art history has been examined. Further, the reasons for this disappearance are investigated in terms of the overarching notion of gender, embedded in social and cultural parameters. The article locates the manner in which these women artists are affected by familial, institutional and social systems and explores the experiences of the women artists in terms of their multiple roles. This can lead to an understanding of the negotiated spaces of private and public domains, which form the paradigms of art practice and are crucial to the expression of women artists.

The critique seeks to register the presence of women artists in South India (which is comprised of four states, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala) from the twentieth century and their contributions. It essentially offers insights into the roles played by the artists and their status not only in terms of gender but also culture and identity and examines the transformations achieved by women artists in South India over the years and the position they occupy. Though Indian Art has grown in international stature and has gained a global visibility today, women artists remain underrepresented in many areas such as major curated shows, international expositions, triennales, and wards of international, national and regional prizes and scholarships. At the national level, South India - the erstwhile Madras presidency continues to register minimally in the mainstream of modern Indian art. The study observes how the women artists' existence in the art world has largely been shown as secondary to that of their male counterparts and that their expressions were not considered 'good enough' to be included in mainstream art. It relates the manner in which the woman artist links herself to her gender through her art to evaluate whether it is done consciously or unconsciously and scrutinizes the extent to which women artists use feminine symbols, through analyses of their art and aesthetics. It also probes into the ways in which women artists deal with their subject matter, especially the depiction of the female figure whatever be the medium of exploration. Further enquires are made into whether women artists share a common platform in terms of their expression and if so, what binds them together.

The word 'artist' appears gendered in art history always alluding to the male and the prefix woman and therefore, was accorded to the few who managed to mark their presence. The art done by women has been repositioned by not just women and feminists, but also by their male counterparts. Women artists in South India use varied approaches in order to persist in elitist art circles and also within the framework of the larger patriarchal societal structures. These women artists often express in their work an appraisal of the leading concerns of inequity, disparity, and subjugation that all women confront on a daily basis. This situation is worsened in India by issues of caste and class. The transition between different spaces, such as rural and urban, led to an interchangeable state of alienation and autonomy for the woman artist. The expressions of these women artists have come into view as potent and vital signs in the present-day art scenario.

The crux of this study is to recognise within the framework of gender that women artists of South India have been neglected. The scope of the study addresses this lacuna and fulfils it through the identification, recovery and registering of some of these artists as an initial step to enhance the opportunities for future research endeavours. The framework of gender inclusion is also ensured by not determining the standing or position of an artist in particular but locating the overall status of women artists of South India denying hierarchic division.

Tracing the History of Women Artists in South India

Thus this article will trace the trajectory taken by women artists in India specifically the southern part to practise their art. Women's art can be traced from the colonial beginnings to the era of independence in the 1940's and 1950's. The artists of the initial era of post-colonialism and independence saw themselves within patriarchal frames and a cultural and social milieu which disallowed women's art practice on grounds of loss of femininity and chastity. Their art however shows a subtle reorientation in terms of negating the voyeuristic gaze. In the next generation, the artists were driven to a search for a selfhood on an equitable basis. In the art of post-independent India of the 1960s and 1970s the focus is on the politics of gender, culture and feminism. In South Indian art, from this period on, art gained momentum, wherein a few artists refused to play out typecast gender roles. This, however, did not break all gender barriers and the epoch of transition was made possible through patriarchal benevolence and institutionalised structures. The individuality of artists did gain merit at this juncture. The next phase of artistic activity shows the transition from a search for a collective identity to that for an individual one, initiated in the 1970s and driven forward in the 1980s by a few women artists. They began to experiment and innovate not only through their art but also through questions directed towards discriminatory practices. This also ensured that the culture of professionalism and work ethics became gender inclusive. This impetus given by subaltern and feminist studies the world over had its impact in the Indian context too. Finally, art from the 1990s onwards examines the establishing of individual identities by the women artists on their own terms. These artists continue their journey towards finding authenticity of expressions through their own individual experiences in the world of commodification and fragmentation.

Methodology

The study is based on interviews and field work carried out between 2007 and 2011 for doctoral research, in the various prominent centres of art activity of the four South Indian states. The criteria for selection of nearly a hundred women artists from South India over a fifty year period ranging from the 1940's to the 1990's remained as open and flexible as possible. As a common and comprehensive frame, artists who are active practitioners at a given period are included. For this, artists' directories² and other published material including books, articles in magazines, newspapers provided a generic basis. At this juncture I would like to point out that more than two thirds of the women artists who have been included in this study have found hardly a mention in documentation of any kind. Interviews and interactions with artists and members of artists' families yielded maximum knowledge which recovered artists who had faded into the

² A survey of the three artists' directories of the Lalit Kala Akademi was done by the author which yielded results indicating very low representation of women artists.

interstices of documented art history. Since artists in the initial period were hardly documented, sources had to be gleaned through interviews to compensate the paucity of available written material. Hence this article uses the interviews of the artists but combines it with my own interpretations of the artworks so that it is not only a documentation but also an analyses of these artists' expressions.

The study records that, women artists in South India began, even during the colonial and nationalist periods in the early part of the twentieth century, to negotiate their gender roles and spaces, though at that stage it was through the conformist mode of resilience. British intervention ushered an era of formal European education and this was gradually extended to women in varied fields including art. This created a gentle, passive influx of art practitioners who hardly gained a space for themselves or their art. Their location was seen only in terms of a benevolent supporter, usually a male relative. They were seen only within the domestic sphere, where concerns of marriage and family staked its claim.

In the following section, I introduce a few of the women artists in order to reiterate that the fact that these women continued their art practice is, in itself a strong statement of not just their passion and commitment to art, but also their gendered stance as women creating viable spaces for themselves as they were contained by the framework of family and class connotations.

Introducing Select South Indian Women Artists

Pre Independent period-1900s

A lone artist hailing from Kerala's elite background such as Mangala Bai Thampuratty, Ravi Varma's³ sister, took an initial step to nurture her talent but conformed to paradigms set by the rigid upper-class community to which she belonged. While Ravi Varma was readily accorded an iconic position as genius artist, Mangala Bai who actively practiced art right up to the age of 84, was denied the same privilege. Ravi Varma was accorded near cult status even in his own time, though he was hardly a solitary explorer of the realm of academic rendering. Male artists like Ravi Varma, practising realistic, classical rendering, won acclaim and recognition for their effort in using western techniques of perspective, chiaroscuro and glazing to name just a few. 'The Bombay School' too excelled at this peculiarly hybrid quality which realized Indian subjects in the western rendition (Chaitanya 139).

³ Chawla, Rupika. Raja Ravi Varma: Painter of Colonial India.



Fig. 1
Mangala Bai Thampuratty,
Courtesy: R.R.V.N.Varma,
Thiruvananthapuram, India.



Fig. 2
Mangala Bai Thampuratty,
Courtesy: R.R.V.N.Varma,
Thiruvananthapuram, India.

Mangala Bai Thampuratty (1866-1953) (Fig.1, 2) was an artist born into the nineteenth century traditional, aristocratic milieu of Kerala. She found her talent for oil painting through her exposure to the medium under the tutelage of her uncle Raja Raja Varma and further at the hands of her brothers Ravi Varma and C. Raja Raja Varma (Chawla 31). As part of the elite nobility in Kerala, she enjoyed a certain amount of freedom accorded to her as a cultured young woman and was allowed to pursue learning the arts as an amateur painter (Sinha, *Expressions* 12).

Nevertheless a stint as a professional painter of portraits was never to be, for it was taboo for noblewomen of the upper class to take up a profession. In her nearly 90 years of existence, Mangala Bai went through the ups and downs of life in a dignified manner, seldom altering her routine.

That she continued to paint till the very end is evident from the fact that one of the last paintings that Mangala Bai did was when she was eighty four years old—a full length oil portrait of *Mahatma Gandhi* (Fig.3), which is hanging at the Government Women's College at Trivandrum (Nandakumaran, Personal Interview 02 Oct. 2010).



Fig. 3

Mangala Bai Thampuratty,
Mahatma Gandhi, c.1940s,
Oil on canvas, c. 152cm x 91cm,
Govt. Women's College Collection,
Courtesy: R.R.V.N.Varma,
Thiruvananthapuram, India.



Fig. 4

Mangala Bai Thampuratty,
Portrait of Ravi Varma, c.1900s,
Oil on canvas, c. 91cm x 61cm,
Courtesy: R.R.V.N.Varma,
Thiruvananthapuram, India.

Though not a prolific painter, Mangala Bai on the other hand was undeniably skilled, as her works indicate such as the portrait of Ravi Varma (Fig.4) featured here. This matronly figure at the threshold of modern Indian art, hardly finds more than a mention in most books, but her works show remarkable dexterity not only in the way she handled the medium of oil but also the technique, the realistic approach and the subject matter she chose to depict which was often personal and autobiographical. Mangala Bai, in all probability, lacked the opportunity to explore all the possibilities of her potential, but within her limitations produced commendable works which show her continued allegiance to Ravi Varma's style of realism, combined with the same interest in portraiture, mythology and epic. Though Mangala Bai's work had hardly been recognized in her time, she is today acknowledged as an artist in her own right.

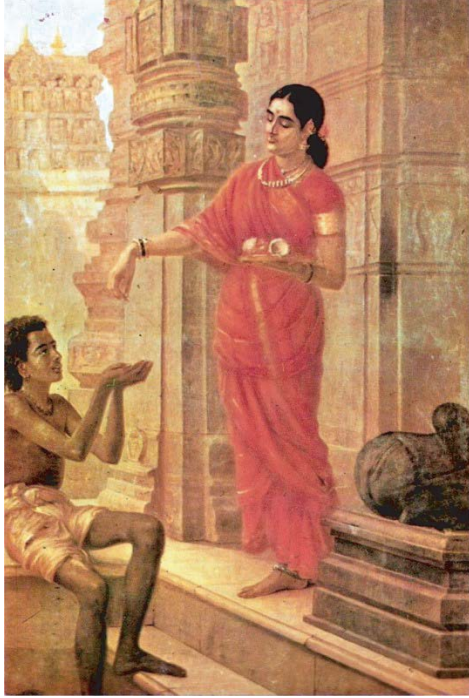


Fig. 5a

Raja Ravi Varma,
Alms Giving, 1899,
 Oil on Canvas, c. 155cm x 108cm,
 Sri Jayachamarajendra Art Gallery
 Trust Collection,
 Mysore, India.



Fig. 5b

Mangala Bai Thampuratty,
Alms Giving, c.1900s?
 Oil on Canvas, 46cm x 30cm,
 Ajayakumar: Women Painters of Kerala,
 Kilimanoor Palace Museum Collection,
 Kilimanoor, India.

The varying sensibilities of portraying a different subject can be seen when comparing for instance *Alms Giving* rendered both by Ravi Varma and Mangala Bai (Fig. 5a, 5b). Ajayakumar, in the *Women Painters of Kerala* exhibition catalogue, points out that Mangala Bai's *Alms Giving* is a 'significant painting' (3). Ravi Varma portrays the upper-class bejeweled woman haughtily throwing money into the waiting hands of the young male beggar; Mangala Bai's portrayal shows a child-woman partially turning her back to the viewer, ladling out gruel into the begging bowl of the ascetic, semi-clad figure of an emaciated old woman (Fig. 5b). Where the former is situated in the public domain of the temple, the latter locates itself in the private sphere of the home; while Ravi Varma shows the middle-aged woman's lusciousness, Mangala Bai further pushes the boundaries depicting the grossly thin, aged beggar-woman, semi-nude, while the young girl with her cascading tresses wears a simple yet luxuriant blouse and lower garment. This contrast also seems to reveal underlying layers of caste and status within the substratum of society which existed in pre-independent India and continues to be a divisive force till today.

Post Independent Modernist period: 1950s-1970s

Independent India awoke from the reverie of freedom only to realise the need to locate its own identity as a new nation. The next time period saw women artists who were starting to seek their positions within their own regional locations in South India. Rural and folk traditions which had been subsumed within national ideology were taken into their own context and reclaimed. The ideas of the western world and prevalent artistic trends of modernism became inspirational sources,

which could be unabashedly intertwined with regional influences. This was the era of an overwhelming quest for identity, not just at the collective, but also individual levels. The 1960s saw the emergence of a few women in South India as artists of merit like Rani Nanjappa née Pooviah and Anila Jacob née Thomas



Fig. 6

Rani Nanjappa,
Kolam 2, c.1970s,
Acrylic, c. 119cmx114cm,
Rana Nanjappa Collection, New Jersey.



Fig. 7

Rani Nanjappa,
Untitled, c.1970s,
Oils, c. 74cm x 66cm,
Rana Nanjappa Collection, New Jersey.

Rani Pooviah's (1935-1992) life and art reflect both her 'Indian-ness' and her modernist inclination. Her later works combine the traditional love of line through the source of *kolams*⁴ with the modern rhythm of the abstracted form and composition (Fig. 6, 7). Rani in her short span of life as an artist did hundreds of paintings and drawings. Unfortunate circumstances cut short what could have been a brilliant artistic career, for Rani was in an accident which left her in a coma for 11 years before her untimely demise. Her simple line sketches were what she called her 'ground', and that was the foundation she built upon in all her work (Nanjappa, Rana. Personal Interview 21 Sep. 2009). Her strength also lay in portraiture and though she could have made a living with portrait commissions, she refused to be entrapped in any one genre and continued her experiments with the regional and folk idioms in an individualistic manner, being a part of the Indian diaspora as she lived abroad for a fragment of her life in artistic practise. Her art was thus based on what she saw as an Indian traditional form and yet, she gave it an international appeal. Her works show the lack of a purely feminine consciousness, in that she does not restrain herself to merely depicting the *kolam*. Instead, she transforms them into a unique non-gendered category through a process of abstraction. Thus she was perhaps one of the first international Indian artists, who laid a claim to their roots through a vocabulary, which transcended all barriers.

⁴ Kolams are hand drawn floor designs done every morning using rice flour or white stone powder at the threshold of homes in Tamil Nadu, South India



Fig. 8

Anila Jacob,
Mother & Child, 2001,
 Wood, c. 90cm x 30cm,
 Josef James: *Cholamandal*,
 Private Collection.



Fig. 9

Anila Jacob,
Fruit Seller, 2007,
 Copper, Bronze, Brass Casting &
 Wood, c. 60cm x 45cm,
 Anila Jacob Collection, Aluva.

Anila Jacob's (1941) abstracted sculptural forms are at once evocative and dynamic, derived from an instinctive use of material. She was the first Indian sculptor to win the national award from the LKA in 1965 for her sculpture in wood (Fig. 8). (James, Soumya, "Anila Jacob", *Cholamandal* 84-85). The figures are pared down to the minimal in terms of form and yet retain a monumental, vital quality. Her versatility in using wood, stone, copper and granite began even as a student and Anila continued to exhibit intermittently, but acknowledges the futility of not being part of the active art movement in India due to her two decade long hiatus abroad after marriage (Jacob, Personal Interview 23 Nov. 2007). The dynamism of her current hybrid works (Fig. 9) which combine wood and metal are a direct result of the years of experimentation and evolution.

The 1970s saw the appearance of very few South Indian women artists who gained eminence and some only worked intermittently. In Andhra Pradesh, Hyderabad ushered in a few commendable practitioners of art like Kavita Deuskar. Kavita Deuskar's (1946) extraordinary empathy for the people who inhabit our everyday world is seen in almost all her depictions, especially of women with their exaggerated limbs on sunburnt, stocky bodies showing the struggle and industry of the toiling folk (Fig. 10, 11).



Fig. 10

Kavita Deuskar,
Milkmaid, 2006,
Colour Pencil, c.120cm x 90cm,
Private Collection.

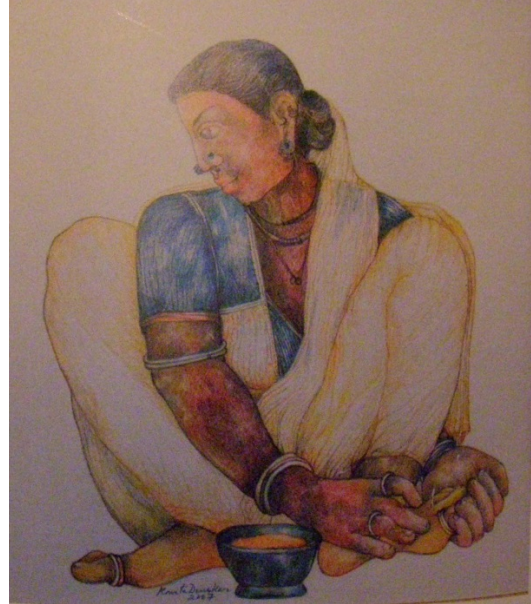


Fig. 11

Kavita Deuskar,
Haldi, 2007,
Colour Pencil, 43cm x 38cm,
Private Collection.

While all her figures share the common situation of intense effort, it is her depiction of women which bear testimony to her understanding of the human circumstance. Through her art, Kavita focuses attention on people from the lower strata, lending them a gentle dignity and a resonance which makes them human yet monumental. These people remain on the fringes of public consciousness and live marginalized lives. The most striking feature of her compositions is the extremities of hands and feet, which literally grab attention, while the eyes of each person depicted within the picture plane is turned away focusing on distant unseen visions.

Another artist who rose to prominence briefly was Rukmini Varma (1940). In the 1970s, she exhibited in London and Germany and a long hiatus came after this period. Rukmini Varma's works reflect personal claims to the Ravi Varma tradition mediated through appropriations.

"*Sarvabharanabhushita* is a word used to describe the Devi⁵ in her complete form which means that she is covered with jewellery"- These were the words uttered by Rukmini Varma who is immersed in exploring the beauty of gems and jewels lying against satiny skin. (Varma, Rukmini Personal Interview 26 May 2011). Rukmini Varma's constant resource has been meeting places of skin and gold, and this preoccupation extends to both men and women. Her men are blatantly masculine and muscular, and covered in jewellery, which she believes enhances the virility of the male figures and the femininity of the female figures (Fig. 12).

⁵ Devi is the supreme goddess in Hinduism.



Fig. 12

Rukmini Varma,
Temple Rendezvous, c.1980s,
Oil on Canvas, 120cm x 90cm,
Private Collection.

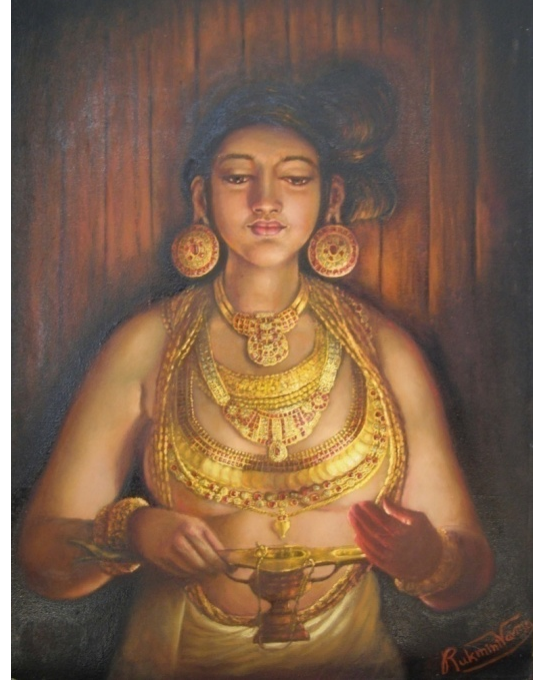


Fig. 13

Rukmini Varma,
Untitled, c.2000,
Oil on Canvas, 60cm x 45cm,
Rukmini Varma Collection, Bengaluru.

The manner in which she juxtaposes her encrusted ornaments against the softness and smoothness of bare skin invokes a Rubenesque feel, albeit in an Indian manner. The painting shows a typical Kerala woman identifiable by the costume where the figure is semi-nude⁶ but covered in jewellery and also wearing the distinctive coiffure of the *Malayali*⁷ woman (Fig. 13).

Postmodernist period: 1970s onwards

The celebration of pluralist, individualist claims of society became a global reality in the 1970s and 1980s. The post-modernist discourses on deconstruction, feminist and subaltern studies impacted themselves throughout the world. In India, the reverberations of globalisation and consumerism made their appearance and the women artists struggled to find a foothold at this time in order to establish themselves on their own terms. The following chronological framework focuses on South Indian women artists who experimented freely and drew upon personal experiences to re-enact their own histories thus shattering the objective approach as being the only mode of expression in art. This also created a pluralist approach to styles, a flux in terms of position and location both in the personal and collective spheres. The works of many women artists who appear subsequently like Padma Reddy and Rathi Devi show the transition from a search for a

⁶ Historic representation of the ancient Indian people shows that they wore only a lower garment and it was only after the 1950s that women in Kerala began wearing an upper garment or blouse.

⁷ Malayalam is the language spoken in Kerala hence the people are also called Malayalis.

collective identity to that for an individual one while some contemporary artists like Pushpamala N and Vasudha Thozhur have pushed the boundaries of art even further.

Padma Reddy (1963), printmaker par excellence loves the medium of etching and woodcut, especially for its multiple layering which allows her to constantly interact and evolve with her prints. In her interview she explains her straightforward positioning as an artist who does autobiographical work using the figurative medium. Her convictions and experiences are conveyed through every single mark that she makes to create her expressions. Her need to engage the spectator to think beyond the obvious, takes the autobiographical and the personal, to the realm of the universal.



Fig. 14

Padma Reddy,
Known Yet Unknown, c.2000,
Woodcut, 28cm x 128cm,
Private Collection.

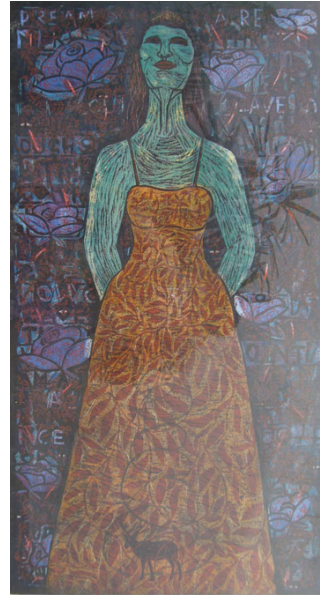


Fig. 15

Padma Reddy,
Untitled, c.2000,
Print, c. 156cm x 38cm,
Private Collection.

The manner in which Padma works, creating and recreating patterns set in a meticulous array, grow organically from within and from outside of the printed surface. The process of printmaking induces a trance-like atmosphere for both the artist and the spectator. She constantly uses motifs such as roses amidst thorns, women wearing sunglasses, mundane objects of the contemporary world and lush forests with equal ease (Fig. 14). Seemingly modern young women wearing beguiling gowns stand confidently in the centre of her compositions (Fig. 15). These figures are more like the Goddesses of the Cycladic period, primeval and strangely contemporary. Padma is of the opinion that artists who are women do have a different sensibility due to their varied experiences and as she continues to explore the female psyche, she shares this collective thread with all women. Padma reveals the crux of her pursuit when she says “whatever an artist or person does in truth, remains closest to who they are” (Reddy, Padma B., Personal Interview 27 Feb. 2010).



Fig. 16

Rathi Devi,
The Golden Staff, 2006,
Oil on Canvas, 130cm x 78cm,
Private Collection.



Fig. 17

Rathi Devi,
Password, 2009,
Acrylic on Canvas, 150cm x 120cm,
Private Collection.

“Society ignores the sounds of expression especially by women” these poignant words by Rathidevi are mirrored in her works which constantly push the boundaries of women’s art. Rathidevi’s (1964) interest lies in showing the exploitation of the environment and also that of women. She is a keen observer of all the aspects of isolation and privileging of certain sections, which happens in all levels of a parochial system. This sensitivity to suppression has given her the strength to question rigidity and the power centre which is reflected in her works (Fig. 16, 17).



Fig. 18

Pushpamala N.,
Motherland, 2010,
Live Performance, Variable,
Courtesy: Samuha, Bengaluru
Photo Credit: Clay Kelton



Fig. 19

Pushpamala N.,
Abduction/Capture, 2009,
Photograph (Giclac Print), 102cm x 152cm,
Photo Credit: Clay Kelton.
Private Collection.

Pushpamala N (1956) works with ‘performative’ photographs, video and performance art with a quirkiness and tongue-in cheek humour (Fig. 18, 19). Whether in a video performance or while being photographed she is comfortable only in a controlled environment and this translates into the elaborate front she creates through rich sensuous details of setting and costume, diverting attention from ‘herself’. Her own body is thus negated, while retaining the process of emergence and to quote the artist “My entire work is very, very feminist work from the beginning. . . .” (Pushpamala, Personal Interview 03 June 2010).

The core of Vasudha Thozhur’s (1956) work is painting and a persistent engagement with her immediate environment reflecting social concerns not only as an artist but also as a human being. Vasudha admits that while “every single person and action is inadvertently transcribed into history”, parochial structures ensure that the marginalized are often thrown out of the historic realm (Thozhur, Personal Interview 22 Feb. 2011). For instance in the work which forms a part of a series called ‘*Untouchables*’ (Fig.20) you see Vasudha seated upon a burning pyre gazing out while a halo of hands encircles her head. The entire work is highly emotive and provocative at once referring to the abolished tradition of *Sati*⁸ and to the continued apathy towards women in Indian society even today.



Fig. 20

Vasudha Thozhur,
Untouchables, 2001,
Oil on Canvas, 2.4m x 1.8m,
Private Collection

Vasudha co-ordinated ‘*The Himmat Workshops*’ (2002-2012) with six adolescent girls who lost several members of their families in the carnage at Naroda Patiya, Ahmedabad, on the 28th of Feb. 2002⁹ (Fig. 21). The project in the artist’s own words “examines the role that art practices

⁸ Sati was the practice wherein widows were burnt alive on their husband’s funeral pyre

⁹ Himmat is a collective formed by the widows of Naroda Patia, with the help of Monica Wahi and Zaid Ahmed Sheikh. The project was possible due to the infrastructure that it provided.

¹⁰ Vasudha Thozhur, Personal Correspondence, 11 Oct. 2016.

can play in a collective trauma and addresses a range of issues from personal loss to displacement and the possibility of mobilization and economic revival through the use of the visual language”¹⁰.

Over the ten years, working with the victims of the Gujarat riots, has given Vasudha Thozhur a strength and vulnerability which is reflected in her work which shows a young woman Shahjehan, who was a victim of abuse and her ‘*himmat*’ or courage. Vasudha incorporated the embroidery done by the young women during rehabilitation into her painting which form the repetitive motifs in the background. The heightened sensitivity of Vasudha’s works continues her social interventions as an artist, as one who seeks to be honest with herself and thereby to the world.



Fig. 21

Vasudha Thozhur,
The Himmat Workshops (2002-2012) - Shahjehan, 2002,
Oil on Canvas, Prints & *Embroidery*, 2.1m x 90cm
Vasudha Thozhur, Vadodara

Contemporary period: 1980s onwards

The divide between art practice and design interventions has blurred considerably in today’s visual culture. Techno-savvy, new age artists have emerged after the 1980s. Popular art, new media and artisanal practices intermingle freely in the artistic expressions of contemporary artists. This period has been earmarked by an implosion of sorts; there has been an effort to question differences and to break preconceived notions not only of gender but of other power structures such as religion, caste, market and economy.

Women artists at this point moved away from the periphery towards visibility and establishment but struggled to disallow the creation of new stereotypes or power centres which continued to privilege one over the other. Some contemporary artists mentioned next like Archana Hande are socially committed to bringing in changes not for themselves but for society at large. Yet others like Benitha Perciyal and Sajitha Gouwry delve into question of self and body thus breaking down barriers of perceived gender realities. They are currently an urban phenomenon but there are the signs of emerging artists from rural spaces creating an alternative location.

A nomadic life has perpetually prepared Archana Hande (1970) to think of issues of displacement and relocation (Hande, Telephone Interview 26 Sep. 2011). Exploring the world through new media has yielded forms that are fragmented and vacuous, but strangely comforting

in their familiarity. Archana uses this oxymoron to create her web installation, which allows for interaction in a disjointed virtual world.



Fig. 22

Archana Hande, *www.arrangeurownmarriage.com*, 2008-2009, Web Installation, Variable, www.archanahande.com, Private Collection.

Her web installation *www.arrangeurownmarriage.com* (Fig. 22) is a spoof, which questions “the purity of authority” which decides the ideal. The spectator is given the choice to create their ideal partners through ‘cutouts’ displayed, offering the various parts of the body allowing the remake of their dream spouses. In this vein, Archana subtly positions herself through the sardonic and the humorous, and continues to nudge forward historic premises transferring them to a shifting present-day location.

For Benitha Perciyal K. (1978), even simple materials took on dialogues which were intuitive and intense. Benitha has built herself up through self-imaging devoid of rigidity. Her works are experiential and reveal an intimate dream world. Benitha’s love of material and craftsmanship takes her work beyond the effort of detailing as several of her works revel in the beauty of the process instead of the outcome alone. Over the years, her work has evolved at varied levels, as she has transitioned from a painter to installer and arranger (Fig. 23). To Benitha, life and death go on in an endless loop and the ultimate giving happens when she crafts herself through her expressions (Perciyal, Personal Interview 03 Dec. 2008).



Fig. 23
Benitha Perciyal K., *Untitled*, c. 2000, Installation, Variable, Private Collection.

Sajitha (Gowry) R. Shankar (1967) is an artist who has found ‘herself’ through her quest which is highly personalized and energetic. She uses the body through an intense exploration of the feminine, so powerful that it allows no room for weakness (Fig. 24, 25). For Sajitha, her individualistic growth rises out of a “. . . deep concern for the status of women, the reality in which I lived. . .” (Shankar, Sajitha Personal Interview 03 May 2010).



Fig. 24
Sajitha Shanker,
Archetype, 2007,
Mixed Media on Canvas, 210cm x 100cm,
Uma Nair: *Stree: Sajitha G.*
Private Collection.



Fig. 25
Sajitha Shanker,
Alter Bodies, 2009-2010,
Mixed Media on Canvas, 120cm x 90cm,
Courtesy: Gowry Art Institute,
Kallar.

Though Sajitha refuses to be pegged as a feminist, she reacts to the feminine energies which surround her at all times. Sajitha continues to defy conventions of every kind by rising above the

moral parameters laid out by society. She works completely on her own terms and has created the connection for all women through persistent effort and extraordinary ability.

Conclusion

Contemporary Indian art in certain quarters has come into its own with women being at the forefront of artistic innovation. Gender equity and freedom of movement from one space to another, such as geographic, socio-cultural and stylistic spaces, has given birth to the New Age woman artist. She no longer seeks validation through her femininity, through her gender or social and cultural markers. This being the ideal is quite apparent, as the negotiable space has originated at the elitist level of art practice and has remained isolated within this paradigm. It has not percolated fully into the sphere of mass visual culture or every day art and design. The crafts persons, especially women, live marginalised, impoverished lives in affirmation of hierarchic structures in society. However, this being said, the scope for an understanding of the art of women, which began with elite art practice, is now gaining ground in several spheres. Women are engaged in artistic practise in different ways: one as 'artists' in the accepted sense of studio practise but many others who do not gain leverage are seen as craftspersons, 'housewives' who practise art merely as a hobby and yet others who continue with other livelihoods and vocations while producing creative work.

To clarify even further various craft traditions continue to flourish in all parts of India and very often woman's art is relegated to the realm of artisanal space when she is involved in mass production while creating handcrafted products. In yet another ironical perspective, while on the one hand women who work from the home are not taken seriously and their work is labelled as the 'hobby' work of housewives thereby denying it due consideration on the other hand women who strive to establish artistic practise while juggling with another vocation are branded as 'non-artists'. In this manner any woman artist who falls outside the preconceived notion of the 'artist' is ignored and remains unnoticed and undocumented.

This article therefore seeks to record a few women artists from the entire Southern region of India over a span of more than fifty years and also brings to light for the first time some artists and works which have never been included in any documented source making a meaningful and inclusive start to the renegotiation of a more all-encompassing art history. It is a new initiative to trace the multiple roles that South Indian women artists have donned as wives, mothers, academicians and feminists among many others as they have risen up to challenges within their individual parameters. Some artists have brought in radical changes with others taking up the parochial model. This has yielded a body of work which boldly questions stratified notions of gender and of the woman's identity as individual and yet within a collective ideology.

"A history of women's art would begin with survival needs" (Hedges 1). Women and work has always been firmly intertwined pushing them constantly into artisanal space while privileging the genius of elitist art practise. Mind over body, subject privileged over the object had become the gender constructs continuously affecting the position of the woman artist the world over and this aspect becomes emphatic in national and regional situations. Denial of industry and craft has not been the Indian notion; however the firm hierarchic connotation wherein these aspects of art are retained within caste, class nexus, is peculiar to the Indian situation. Women and their art negotiate the three mutually inclusive trajectories of identity, self and position. The search for identity and self is sometimes autobiographical, that is, based on the individual or it is founded on the collective in terms of global, national, regional, feminine and iconic. The female body is seen

as an object of desire and consumption, in terms of sexuality, sensuality and/or divinity. The woman artist's position is sited in terms craftsmanship, location of skill and talent in the art world. In the social context, she sees herself as a collective being and as a harbinger of change as explained in the works of artists like Archana Hande and Vasudha Thozhur among others.

Despite an increase in the number of such women artists in art practice, at the grassroots level, they are still a distinct minority in terms of museum showings, major exhibitions, national awards and international auctions. The visible invisibility of the women artists of South India in modern times is a result of the social imbalance of structures in terms of gender. Patriarchal constructs conform till date to a hierarchy wherein power structures remain unshaken and male artists continue to remain visible while women artists are not given as much exposure or even financial and social support. Women artists including some like Benitha, Rathi Devi¹¹ mentioned in this article are judged in art circles not only in terms of their work but also their lives and their commitment to art. However, art, which has been perceived as a male bastion, has been successfully stormed by women artists. Sustained efforts are nevertheless required to reclaim artisanal practices and the works of many artists from across divisions need to find a place in social consciousness. Research endeavours in future can be designed towards such enquiries. This can pave the way towards emancipation from stratification, which can lead to a more humanistic approach within the artists' world, carrying it forward, creating new and inclusive histories of art.

¹¹ Personal interviews

References

- Artists Directory: Covering Painters, Sculptors and Engravers. First Edition. New Delhi: Sanyal B.C. (Secretary), LKA, 1961. Print.
- Chawla, Rupika. Raja Ravi Varma: Painter of Colonial India. Ahmedabad: Mapin Pub., 2011. Print.
- Guha-Thakurta, Tapati. The Making of a New 'Indian' Art: Artists, Aesthetics and *Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850-1920*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992. Print.
- Hedges, Elaine and Ingrid Wendt eds. *In Her Own Image: Women Working in the Arts*. New York: The Feminist Press, 1980. Print
- Indian Art since The Early 40s: A Search for Identity*. Artists' Handicrafts Association, Cholamandal Artists' Village, 1974. Print.
- James, Josef, ed. Contemporary Indian Sculpture: The Madras Metaphor. Madras: Oxford University Press, 1993. Print.
- , ed. *Cholamandal: An Artists' Village*. Chennai: Oxford University Press, 2004. Print.
- James, Soumya. "Anila Jacob." *Cholamandal: An Artists' Village*. Ed. Josef James Chennai: Oxford UP, 2004. 80-91. Print.
- Jhaveri, Amrita. *A Guide to 101 Modern and Contemporary Indian Artists*. Mumbai: India Book House Pvt Ltd., 2005. Print.
- Jyothish, Joshi, ed. *Artists Directory 2006*. Third Edition. New Delhi: Sudhaka Sharma (Secretary), LKA, 2006. Print.
- Kapur, Geeta. *When Was Modernism-Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice In India*. New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2000. Print.
- Krishnan S.A., ed. *Artists Directory 1981*. Second edition. New Delhi: R.L. Bartholomew (Secretary), LKA, 1981. Print.
- Sinha, Gayatri. *Expressions & Evocations: Contemporary Women Artists of India*. Mumbai: Marga Publications on behalf of the National Centre for the Performing Arts, 1996. Print.
- Women Painters of Kerala (exhibition catalogue)*. Thrissur: Kerala LKA, 2007. Curator: Ajayakumar. Print.

Interviews and Communications

- Deuskar, Kavita. Personal Interview. 26 Feb. 2010.
- Hande, Archana. Telephone Interview. 26 Sep. 2011.
- Jacob, Anila. Personal Interview. 09 Mar. 2010.
- Jacob, Anila. Personal Interview. 23 Nov. 2007.
- Nandakumaran, Mangala. Personal Interview. 02 Oct. 2010.
- Nanjappa, Rana. Personal Interview. 21 Sep. 2009.
- Nanjappa, Rana. Personal Interview. 30 Jan. 2010.
- Perciyal, Benitha K. Personal Interview. 03 Dec. 2008.
- Pushpamala, N. Personal Interview. 03 June 2010
- Rathi Devi, T. Personal Interview. 10 Mar. 2010.
- Reddy, Padma B. Personal Interview. 27 Feb. 2010.
- Shankar, Sajitha Gouwry. Personal Interview. 17 Nov. 2007.
- Shankar, Sajitha Gouwry. Personal Interview. 03 May 2010.
- Thozhur, Vasudha. Personal Interview. 22 Feb. 2011.
- Thozhur, Vasudha. Personal Correspondence. 11 Oct. 2016.

Varma, R.R.V.N. Personal Interview. 02 Oct. 2010.
Varma, Rukmini. Personal Interview. 26 May 2011.