



Women Fine Artists in Contemporary India: an Empirical Study

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ABSTRACT

The paper investigates the position of women fine artists in contemporary India. This research in the area of sociology of art employs empirical data to understand the women artists' views. The art world has gender disparity visible in status, earnings, recognition and fame. Moreover the label 'women artists' comes with its share of disadvantages. Majority of the women artists expressed the need to have gender neutral space for appreciating their creativity and art.

KEYWORDS : contemporary fine artists, women artists, sociology of art

The aim of the present research paper is to investigate the position of women as 'artists' in the field of fine arts in contemporary India. These women are engaged in fine arts as a profession and express their creativity through the medium of painting. The primary data is part of a larger research in the field of sociology of art. The method used to collect data is in depth interviews of seventy fine artists of Baroda city out of which twenty three are women artists. Gender and socio-cultural context are presumed to play a crucial role in the individual's life.

Women in contemporary India have proliferated into various professional spaces which were predominantly male. The women's movement has given the much needed impetus to women's development but women's search for identity and recognition is an enduring task especially in a patriarchal society like India. Women have to fight not so much against the system as against their imbibed social self which is a product of the socio-cultural context in which they are socialized. This research paper also tries to elicit women artists' views and comprehend if the visibility in the art world as 'women artists' poses problems.

The term 'artist' conjures up the image of a 'male' artist as he is the archetype of a creative individual. This reflects that the language we use has underlying supposition and reflects male dominance. But do women artists want to be known as 'women artists'? The history of women artists in India is as recent as 1970s, but women artists have existed since the ancient times as is evident from references of them in ancient literary text and recently through some feminist historiography. In the popular histories women more often featured only as the object. But in the arts there is a visible shift of women as object to women as subject; 'The favored theme of 'women in Indian art' is gradually giving way to the new theme of 'Indian women artists' (Guha-Thakurta 1999:171). Despite this literature on artists highlights the underrepresentation of women artists not only at the art exhibitions but also in museum collections.

Before we embark upon investigating the contemporary scenario it is pertinent to look back and try to locate the current subject matter in a particular historical context. Historically it is evident that Histories are His Stories and not hers, as history across cultures portrays a patriarchal bias. In fact in the world history there is a lacuna of information about women in general and it is said that exclusion of women in history is one means to repress their voices and their position. 'Their (women) exclusion was seen as systematic and structural to the discipline (*art history*) itself, which operated with the assumption that the very domain of fine arts as opposed to crafts was a masculine one' (Dave-Mukherji: 2003).

In Indian context it is necessary to see if the history of ancient Indian society reflected any popular women artists? From the early twentieth century interpretation of Indian art were carried out by art Historians, Archaeologists, Indologists and scholars leading to better understanding of Indian art. In fact art was a part of everyday life in ancient India. But that does not mean women artists or patrons did not exist in those times, 'recent feminist scholarship has brought to light names of important women patrons of art which included courtesans who wielded considerable authority and commissioned construction of

stupas, monasteries and temples. Historically there is more information about women who are patrons rather than women artists.' (Dave-Mukerji 2003:205). Thus the visibility of women as artists is not evident just as the male artist in ancient India was anonymous and an unknown figure. In fact only a handful of personal names of male artists resonate in Indian history.

Coming back to contemporary art scene, it was only in the nineteen seventies that evidence of women artists being discussed in the history of India is visible. In fact global history has accepted that traditionally women artists were overlooked and were not considered to be a part of the art world as their entry into art guilds and academies were restricted. But there are references in the ancient Indian scriptures of women artisans and accomplished painters. In fact in the ancient times the field of art was not divided along gender lines and recent feminist scholars have also mentioned names of important women patrons of art (*ibid.*: 201). Women in early twentieth century in India began participating in the varied professions and art was one such creative endeavor. The first public exhibition by the Bengal school artists in 1919 included two women artists, one of who was Sunaina Devi of Tagore family. But it is also apparent that the first woman artist of India who was globally recognized, Amrita Sher-Gil underplayed her gender in a man's world. In contemporary India, we do witness progress as there are women artists who are equally committed and professional.

At the global level the inquiry into the existence of prominent women artists in art history began in 1971 through an article 'Why have there been No Great Women Artists?' by Linda Nochlin. The first generation of women artists and art critics recognized that women were underrepresented in exhibitions and galleries, and female experience was neither validated nor even addressed in mainstream art (Gouma-Peterson and P. Mathew 1987:326,332). But feminist movement in art has brought to light the names of some very talented women artists of the world. In India, amongst the artists, the women fine artists are still marginal and amongst the renowned and famous artists only a handful women artists have featured in the international art auctions such as Amrita Sher-Gil and Anjoli Ela Menon.

Reflecting on the question posed regarding the label 'women artists', it is inferred through academic discourse that women who are artists are exposed to the dilemma of being labeled as 'women artists'. It is evident through the empirical research which reflects similar views of categorization of women in the art field. The twenty three fine artists referred to here are fine artists engaged in painting and exhibiting their works in art galleries. Out of these twenty three, 2/3^{ds} were of the opinion that being considered 'artists' is more appropriate than being called 'women artists' because they are at par with male counterparts in the art world and being called 'women artists' would mean taken lightly or getting evaluated on less stringent rules. A few of them also mentioned that they are treated not as professional fine artists but as women who indulged in it as some vocation. There were others who said that they are proud to be women and did not mind being referred to as 'women artist'. These women were of the opinion that within the art world there is hardly any distinction but the prices that their works fetch compared to those fetched by male artists does reflect that the women artists are not treated at par with their

male counterparts. Zolberg states, "The women who remained artists suffered more difficult living conditions than the men; they generally were earning between 50 to 85 percent of men's earnings (123: 1990). The prices paintings fetch is considered as one of the yardstick to ascertain status within the art world. Women artists from India (as maybe from world over) have not got their due recognition since valuation of art may be in the hands of a set of people who are a part of the male hegemony. This of course needs to be investigated and assumptions would not suffice.

Investigating the label 'women artists' in the current research showed that it leads to the belief of being taken lightly. A great majority of the female respondents did not want to be labeled as women artists as it would mean either less stringent evaluation or they feared being placed into a category which is judged differently than men. The term 'women artists' throws open, a basic asymmetry between men and women, which permeates the very language we use. 'Women' here becomes a qualifying term without which the word 'artist' simply means 'male artist' (Dave-Mukherji 2003: 191). In fact feminist art historians claim that women's non-inclusion was 'systematic and structural to the discipline itself, (*art history*) which operated with the assumption that the very domain of fine arts as opposed to crafts was a masculine one' (*ibid.*)

The study illustrates that more than 3/4ths of the respondent women artists felt that their experiences as women are unique and are expressed in their art. In fact every artist gives expression to their unique experiences, and ideas. Some of the women artists depict in their paintings the oppression of patriarchy by using powerful metaphors. Nilima Sheikh, a senior woman artist, in one of her series of paintings constructed stories based on the case of Champa, given in marriage, tortured by in-laws and destined to a violent death, the fate ordained for her due to dowry demands. Another female artist who previously worked in the narrative mode has shifted to a symbolic style and in her paintings a woman's figure depicts feminine aura and this is constructed by usage of metaphors of fertility. Heeral Trivedi uses images to make her private experiences public and has created a series of paintings on motherhood and nurture. On the other hand another female artist scrutinizes the tremendous pressure exerted by society as it compels women to play prescribed roles and acknowledges the role of mythology in naturalizing these roles.

In a catalogue (Images of compassion) consisting of works and life of a senior artist, Naina Dalal, the balance that a woman artist has to create if she desires to cater to both her family and art is visible in the words of her artist husband, '(The Artist) has waded her way through raising and imparting values to them (*children*) and at the same time creating art with great skill, struggling sometimes, failing sometimes, gathering courage and beginning afresh. She has withstood social and political resistance, damaging critical reviews and lack of funds and studio facilities at times.' (Parimoo Krishnan 1999:10). Many of the women artists mentioned how they compromised and balanced their dual roles like enumerable working women world over. They point out that this does not make them any less dedicated professionals than men. The male artist has undeniable accessibility into the higher echelons of art world while the female is denied or has to struggle to get entry into the same.

Analysis of the themes of these women artists echo their concerns revolving around subservience, exploitation, discrimination against women and feminism along with a plethora of human experiences. These women respondents have shown an inclination to convey through their art unique experiences as women and to depict images which evolve through their feminine existence. These experiences and ideas are unique and need to be highlighted. It is found that 'A whole body of recent research in psychology, literature, art, music, sociology, and education indicates that women perceive reality differently than men, for whatever reasons, and therefore have different expectations of and

responses to human experience.' (Gouma- Peterson and Mathew 1987 : 334). Carol Gilligan in her work '*In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*' states "Given the self and morality, women bring to the life cycle a different point of view and order human experiences in terms of different priorities" (1982: 22). In fact an academic debate of whether the female sensibility is biologically determined or is purely a social construct has been ongoing for decades. The several studies explored by Gouma -Peterson and Mathew in their article '*The Feminist Critique of Art History*' have concluded 'gender is a factor in how women create and interpret images, not for biological reasons, but because their experiences of the world are different from those of men' (1987 : 337). It is not essential to emphasize on their womaness but to bring to the fore their distinctive struggle and triumph in a male dominated profession. Here the term woman is emphasized not because it has become fashionable to bring gender in discussions but being women they would have had to go through tensions and pressure trying to balance the two arenas of their lives, family and profession and yet move towards fulfilling their creative aspirations. Also more than half of the respondent women artists have through their paintings depicted women and their issues at some point which is of significance to the art world.

Conclusion

There is an inherent tension as to whether the aspect highlighted by feminist art historians of 'neglect of women artists' is crucial to the art world or has it further led to a dilemma in the minds of the women artists to be considered a separate category. But it is necessary to applaud the efforts of recent feminist scholars who have highlighted the names of not only women artists but also women patrons of art. Majority of the women artists who were interviewed, expressed their desire to be known as 'artists' and not 'women artists', as placing them into a separate category would mean they would be judged differently from male artists. If the art is to be understood or judged then the creators' sex should not be considered as an important element in the process of viewing or appreciating art. Since women artists have uniqueness in their experiences and expression they should not only gain equal appreciation, based on merit but also be proud of being women in a time and era when their achievements are commendable. One would expect a creative field to have mechanisms to neutralize gender hierarchy and distinctions.

It is important to note that in traditional Indian art individuality of the artists was not a matter of celebration; it may be so due to the cultural inclination of the Indian psyche towards upholding collectivistic feeling rather than individualistic approach towards life. In contemporary Indian society where the visual art medium is gaining momentum and paintings are fetching astronomical prices, due to the hegemony of certain groups it is the male artists who are gaining all the recognition. Some women artists accept that women are not treated equally when it comes to pricing of paintings, yet they are not really questioning the yardstick which is used to evaluate and appreciate art. But most of them do not deliberately want to emphasize their separateness and in that sense they are no different from women in other professions (just as women would not like to be referred to as a woman manager or a woman professor). A small section of the respondent women who want to be different and would want to be proudly referred to as 'women artists' said so because of their belief that their art works represent a set of ideas and experiences which are unique. But whether the profession of fine arts is gender-neutral requires further exploration. There are several layers which we can unravel in the process of understanding the position of women in the art world but it is necessary to keep in mind that by just giving the women artists their due and highlighting their works can inspire thousands of women in our country who may want to find a foothold in professions of their choice. The women artists who have achieved laurels in the art world, still dominated by men, needs to be applauded as it would mean celebrating the progressive atmosphere in contemporary Indian art.

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