
AFTERWORD

Afterword

Embroidery, weaving and quilting was practiced by the women since centuries. Modernism in the west had tried to glorify the act of painting as Fine arts, which was considered to be on the top of the hierarchical order in art and marginalized the crafts essentialising it to the idea of the feminine, a lower form of art excluded from the discussions of Fine arts. The act of painting and the medium; colour and canvas or the act of sculpting and its medium; stone or bronze received a more coveted position than the art forms the medium of which were the thread and textile or other ephemeral mediums like rice flour (alpona). This order of things is also seen in the analogy of the building by Abanindranath in his comparison of art and its hierarchy. This categorical hierarchies of intellectual labour and manual art forms (crafts): the supposedly creative (painting) and the decorative, further becomes complex in the context of indigenous modernism. 'In the texts like *Aitereya Brahmana*, *shilpa* is referred to as an intellectual endeavor. The scope of inclusion of decorative tradition within this category seems to be debatable. Further women's art is considered feminine in a derogatory sense having no intellectual aura and is often categorized as decorative. Visnudharmottara refers to the term *bhushana* which has stronger association with the word decorative. There, it is described as among the four essential elements of painting. In this text itself, there is the reference of ornamentation and its association with women. According to this, 'the aesthete or *sahridaya* looks for skilled craftsmanship, while women have a taste for ornament and ordinary folks prefer vivid colour.'

This reminds again of the metaphor of ornaments in relation to female students

1 This discussion is referred from Rohini Iyengar's unpublished thesis on 'Figuring regional aesthetics: Women artists via Regional Histories and modernisms.p129

by Abanindranth. He said—‘I will build a temple in which the men will be the bricks. Art will be the idol and women will be the flowers with which I will make the garland.’²

The interpretations of Bhushana, according to Priyabala Shah, are 1)decoration,2)contextually the method and act of painting itself as decoration and 3)ornamentation to include ornaments for figures or in the areas of the painting.³

This last discussion on ornament and ornamentation as being part of the art practice becomes important in the discourse of formulating the indigenous modernism. The discourse of the decorative and crafts which was identified with the domestic/feminine by the patriarchal discourse of art was subverted, in reclaiming the consciousness from the colonial discourse of the oriental, it formulated the nationalist aesthetics by incorporating these ideas of othering and derogation as concepts empowering them. There is an attempt to resolve the difference between fine arts traditionally aligned with painting and sculpture and the decorative and ornamental.

The idea of the feminine is problematized in the discourse of nationalism as already discussed earlier, the tropes of mother becomes resources for co-opting the women's question in a regressive nature of the creation of a patriarchal narrative of mythification of the women's body as seen in the representations of Ravi Varma , Abanindranath and Nandalal .Their representations of female body uses the tropes of the unspoilt , nurturer and sacrificing women who differ from the debased prostitutes represented in the Kalighat patas, the Company and Battala paintings . The reformation movement had been problematized as a domain being regulated to reformulate the domain of patriarchy rather than allowance of occasional agencies to the women, sometimes tending towards the satirical images in the cartoons by Gaganendranath Tagore,

2 Shilpiguru Abanindranath by Rani ChandaViswabharati publication,p-30

3 Priyabala Shah,ed,Vishnudharmottara-Purana vol.1Oriental institute ,Baroda,1958

Benoy Sarkar and Jatin Sen. The other area which became important for the reformulation of Indian art and in articulating its position as 'Fine arts' was the revival of the discourse of Aesthetics. The discussions on Indian aesthetics also sees the appropriation of the feminine by using female metaphors: Abanindranath's writings are replete with the feminine imagery. But there is also a denial of agency to the women as art practitioners.

But within these narrations of appropriation of the feminine there is a rupture in the idea of the feminine as the category which becomes the parameter of difference that defines the normative status of other forms of art practice by men. These moments of appropriation also open up professional spaces for women in educational institutions, public spaces of exhibitions and journals.

The extension of this discussion of the feminine and gender is read through a brief discussion of Nilima Sheikh's work in the contemporary context where there is a critical reappropriation of the indigenous modern which took its cues from the emphasis on history and historical processes which brings about a specific set of meanings for feminism and also speaks of the imagination of the woman which is being made and remade in different contexts and different times.

The discussions in this thesis attempts to bring in the discourse of gender through documentation of women artists of early 20th century Bengal, the aim being not writing them back to the canons of art history but to bring in the understanding of the construal of women in the art practices ,it is not to essentialize and neither to erase the existence of women in art practices but to understand the spaces in between and re-interpret the art historiography of the 'Swadeshi Art movement' with the aspiration to contribute to the feminist art historical interventions in Indian art.

Differ, defer and the invented subjectivities: disjointed times in paintings of Nilima Sheikh

This discussion on Nilima Sheikh is not about tracing the roots of her art practice rather it is about the navigations of the indigenous modernism into her work. It is about the rupture it made in the highly patriarchal language of tradition. The femininity in her work had been talked about, but it is the feminine or the lyrical which had been appropriated by the project of framing the Indian Aesthetics as a counter discourse to the Occidental Orientalism which contributes to the lyrical and the feminine forms in her paintings. Amrita Sher-gil who had been given the status of being the pioneer women artist in India also looked at indigenous traditions of miniature paintings and had a sympathetic understanding of the women's life but often tended towards the idea of exoticization.



Fig.1. Nilima Sheikh, When Champa Grew up, 30 X 40 cms each, Gum tempera, 1984

It is to be observed that Nilima further problematizes the idea of the feminine by choosing the narrations from texts inscribed by ideas of femininity which transcends mere constructions and speaks about the politics behind its construals. She puts forth- 'My rebellion ,if it can be called that, was against the prevailing stereotype of pre-nineteenth-century painting as decorative, ornamental ,flat ,precious, sentimental, etc. For example miniature painting was often called feminine.' ⁴ This is where she brings about the difference from her colleagues belonging to early 20th Century Bengal.

Nilima's journey towards feminist tropes begins with the narrative of Champa ,a girl from her neighbourhood ,this narrative culminates in a dowry death. She says- "Champa holds the particular story in tension with the typifications of a patriarchal structure, encapsulates it as a personal yet pre-plotted life-story .The prefacing text of a Gujarati folk song ,lamenting the unhappiness and punitive murder of a daughter-in- law in a village ,inserts a second generic, premonitory narrative that presages and anchors the urban feminist in extant orality.'" ⁵ It can be seen again how Nilima uses the oral tradition which again is an integral part of women's literary tradition.(Fig.1)

Nilima chooses Akka Mahadevi as her visual source for her series 'Speaking of Akka'. She brings the discourse of body which is not the glorified maternal body nor is it the sexualized body which was valorized by the male artists. This body without garment becomes the symbol of empowerment which subverts the male gaze. A women in pain, the process of birthing is being captured by her again creating a rupture in the tradition of depicting the glorified maternal bodies with their children in a playful manner. In her work Carrying home she shows a woman giving birth in a refugee camp thus making the distinction between the private and the political thin.(Fig.2)

4 Perception of tradition-Interrogating Modernism, Interview by Vishakha N Desai for Conversation with traditions Nilima Sheikh and Sazia Sikander,p.71

5 Kumkum Sangari,Ruptures,junctures,returns,(UN)Lived histories,Feminist propositions and Nilima Sheikh Ed. Sangari Kumkum, Trace Retrace, Paintings by Nilima Sheikh,p.122



Fig.2.Nilima Sheikh, Maternity 2,
Brush drawing on vasli paper, 1997

Urvashi Butalia's 'The other side of silence' becomes an important point of reference, the recalling of narrations of the mythical past, the tales of abduction and love is mapped on the narrative of partition. (Fig.3) The everyday and the domestic scenes had been palimpsested on the very politically charged issue of Kashmir where the idea of independent Kashmir overlooks or ignores the issues regarding the women, their rights and voices in the larger narration of a separate nation. The mother's body is bereft of any national ideals like Bharatmata, it's about the mourning women and their personal loss which is being categorically neglected by the nation state. The autobiographical musing of the artist about her own work, in her own words is something to be looked upon by the viewers which provide signposts in the process of understanding her works. She reminisces that - "The birth of my children changed my life and world view as nothing else had, precipitating a recognition of intimacy as the structural principle of my new life. And I looked to alternative readings of painting traditions-of Asia, particularly- to transcribe this cognizance into my

work.’’ ‘One can relate the significance of this comment to the opening up of the interiority of the private self and the self-identity aligned with the idea of nation/or palimpsest of Asiatic traditions and also the very local/ regional ,the very feminine domain of the domestic/mundane. The nook and corner of the neighbourhood, the contemporary discourses on dowry death, domestic labour transmogrify into narrations of marginalized identity of a women, Kashmiriyat and communal interfaces in history and contemporary times. A senior artist friend of her exclaimed about the inclusion of her children in the pictorial space, she retorts-”Why should I not paint domestic scenes and put my children into my paintings? Why should I not make my painting relevant to my life?”’⁷ (Fig.4),(Fig.5) This reminded me about Nabaneeta Devsen’s comment long back in one of her interviews where a feminist scholar asked her about how her writings become feminist if she focuses on her home , her day to day interactions with her two daughters as a single mother along with her aged mother.



Fig.3. Nilima Sheikh, Kissa Zainab Buta: Tale of two abductions.
58 X 84 cms, Mix tempera on vasli paper, 2001

6 Biographical note: ,Nilima Sheikh, Ed. Sangari Kumkum, Trace Retrace, Paintings by Nilima Sheikh ,p.335

7Biographical note: ,Nilima Sheikh, Ed. Sangari Kumkum, Trace Retrace, Paintings by Nilima Sheikh p.335

When talking about re- writing history and even art-history the interiority of a women's life is to be analyzed as a construct through which different societal relations can be read or vice- versa. Nilima talks about “small pleasures and private pains “, her search she says is for the feminine as well as the painter's journey for the ever transient idioms of painterly language. According to her a mimetic attempt of tradition often gets confused with nostalgia, but she puts forth that she prefers visual traditions from the past, she remarks-... “by copying images by hand I can interiorize those histories.”⁸



Fig.4 Nilima Sheikh, A picture of my children,
61 X 61 cms, oil on canvas 1980

The uniqueness and the singularity of modernist language dotted by histories of exclusions are in rupture by the plurality in Nilima's works. Kumkum Sangari refers to the multidirectional diffusion and brings forth intricacies of the practice, tracing traditions, the complexities of traditions and the art practice. She mentions - “Indian artist emerged not directly from a *gharana* or *karkhana* but collaborationist intersections of the quasi artisanal, popular, commercial and volatile bazaar, early bourgeoisie, landed rentier and urban professional groups, the circuit of British art school education from the mid-nineteenth century.”⁹ Hence one finds quotations not only from different textual referenc-

⁸ Ibid, p.368

⁹ Kumkum Sangari, Ruptures, junctures, returns, (UN)Lived histories, Feminist propositions and

es but varied stylistic sources of crafts ranging from pichhvais ,thankas, brocades and patas and the very repetitive process of stencil in Nilima's works . She writes- "The familiarity and repetition of a motif/pattern invokes the artisanal labour of near faithful replication of a design with an unsigned origin, a copying that encodes and arrests the labour-time of reproduction."¹⁰ Thus it is observed that Nilima also inherits the idea of incorporating the artisanal in her painterly practice which again traces her journey to the Santiniketan art movement in early twentieth century.

Nilima mentions-'I am part of the third generation of artists who have engaged with Indian traditions. There was the generation of Abanindranath Tagore ,Nandalal Bose and Binode Behari Mukherjee and then the generation of their student Subramanyam.'¹¹ There is a distance and adherence, a discontinuous time an overwriting of texts through visuals and even images being overlaid ,interpolation of time takes place and juxtaposition of referrals, all these contextualizes her in the larger narration of the contemporary.

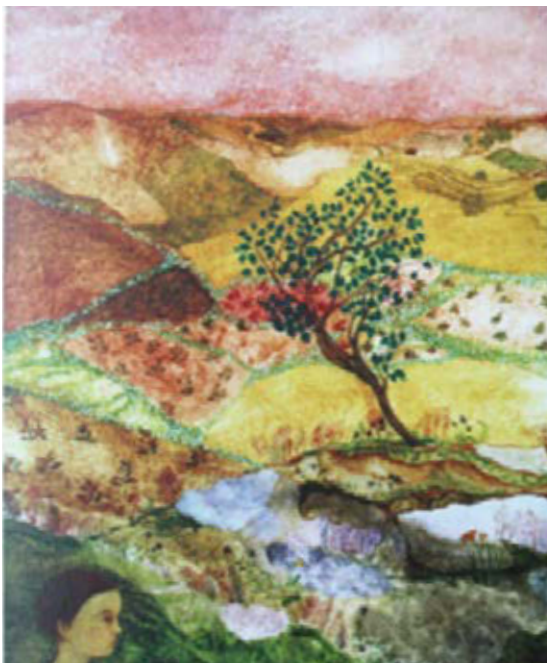


Figure 5, Nilima Sheikh, Samira in Dalhousie, 61 X 72 cms, 1978



Figure 5, Nilima Sheikh, Kabir and Raju, 61 X 72 cms, 1978

Nilima Sheikh, p.141

10 Kumkum Sangari, Ruptures, junctures, returns, (UN)Lived histories, Feminist propositions and Nilima Sheikh, Ed. Sangari Kumkum, Trace Retrace, Paintings by Nilima Sheikh, p.151

11 Politics of 'Tradition' Interview by Vishakha N Desai for Conversation with traditions Nilima Sheikh and Sazia Sikander, p.67

