

FEMINIST NARRATIVES IN BENGAL ART

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ABSTRACT

This research delves into the captivating yet often overlooked narrative of Bengal's feminist artists, as revealed through the strokes of their canvases. Spanning the mid to late 20th century, a transformative period in Bengal's socio-political landscape, these artists emerged as pioneers navigating uncharted territories on canvas. The intersection of feminism and artistic expression became a conduit for challenging societal norms and redefining women's roles. The historical evolution of depicting women in Bengal's art, from traditional constraints to the revolutionary works of artists like Chittaprosad and Somnath Hore, reflects a vibrant tapestry of evolving roles and empowerment. Abanindranath Tagore's iconic 'Mother India' and Zainul Abedin's aesthetic tribute further enrich this exploration. The conclusion emphasizes the dynamic journey marked by evolving perspectives, challenging stereotypes, and celebrating the diverse roles women play, making each brushstroke a story of empowerment, resilience, and the continuous evolution of feminist voices in Bengal's painting history.

METHOD

This research uses a mix of firsthand and existing information. Primary data is derived from paintings observation, engaging directly with artistic expressions. Secondary data encompasses a comprehensive review of books, articles, artist biographies, and internet sources. A triangulation approach ensures data validity and reliability. Thematic analysis is applied to paintings, while content analysis is used for written sources. The synergy between firsthand observations and diverse secondary resources enriches the research, offering a holistic perspective on the subject, bridging artistic intent with scholarly discourse for a nuanced exploration of the chosen theme.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the rich tapestry of Bengal's cultural history, a compelling and often overlooked narrative unfolds—one woven by the brushstrokes of formidable Bengali feminist artists. Within the canvas, societal norms are not merely depicted but deconstructed, as the strokes become agents of social change. This research embarks on a nuanced exploration of the history of Bengali feminist artists in painting, revealing the stories of artists whose canvases serve as both mirrors and catalysts for the evolving narratives of gender equality, empowerment, and societal transformation.

To understand the genesis of these artistic voices, we must delve into the socio-political landscape of Bengal. The mid to late 20th century witnessed transformative changes, not only in the political milieu but also in culture and identity. Against the backdrop of post-

colonial India and a society grappling with its own contradictions, Bengali feminist artists emerged as pioneers navigating uncharted territories on canvas. This period set the stage for a re- evaluation of gender roles and the redefinition of women's roles in society.

2. FEMINISM AND ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

Feminism, as a socio-political movement, found resonance in the expressive realm of art. Within this movement, Bengali feminist artists used their brushes as instruments of agency, painting narratives that questioned, challenged, and redefined the status quo. The intersection between feminism and artistic expression became a conduit through which these artists communicated the complexities of women's lives, their struggles, and their aspirations.

3. HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF DEPICTING WOMEN IN BENGAL'S ART

The journey through Bengal's artistic legacy unfolds a transformation in the portrayal of women. Traditional art, influenced by religious and mythological themes, often confined women to prescribed roles. The Bengal School of Art, led by luminaries like Abanindranath Tagore, marked a shift, but societal expectations still lingered. Modernist artists like Zainul Abedin challenged norms by emphasizing the natural beauty and strength of women in everyday life.

Chittaprosad, in a departure from the traditional values of Indian art, places the life and struggles of common men at the center of his paintings, presenting women as competent components of society. His art breaks away from portraying women as commodities, depicting them instead as vital contributors, whether as wives, partners in labor, or mothers. The commitment of Chittaprosad to the oppressed class is evident in his detailed and imaginative portrayals.

The narrative extends to Somnath Hore's paintings, where women are shown actively participating in various facets of life, from harvesting in fields to confronting landlords with lathis. Each artist contributes a unique perspective, collectively forming a vibrant tapestry that reflects the evolving roles and empowerment of women in Bengal.

4. ABANINDRANATH TAGORE'S 'MOTHER INDIA': A SYMBOLIC TAPESTRY

Abanindranath Tagore's artistic philosophy was deeply rooted in spirituality, and he often explored themes of mysticism and divine connection. While this might not be a direct feminist perspective, his focus on spiritual ideas could be interpreted as a move towards emphasizing the spiritual equality of individuals, transcending gender roles.

He depicted women in roles that went beyond traditional stereotypes. While his portrayals were often influenced by the aesthetics of classical Indian art, he occasionally depicted women in more dynamic and unconventional poses, breaking away from the typical passive representations prevalent in earlier art.

Abanindranath Tagore's iconic watercolor rendition of



Figure 1: Bharat Mata

Bharat Mata, (**figure 1**) stands as a testament to the 'ideals' of Indian femininity. Depicted holding 'the four gifts of the Motherland to her children,' the fragility of Mother India's delicate figure, veiled in saffron clothing, is juxtaposed with the emblematic motif of white lotuses at her feet. This image gained immense popularity, becoming a tangible manifestation in rallies and protests during the Swadeshi movement, embodying the ideology of 'one's own country' and 'Indianness.'

5. ZAINUL ABEDIN'S AESTHETIC TRIBUTE TO BENGAL

Zainul Abedin, acclaimed as 'Shilpacharya' (Master of Art), left an indelible mark on the art world with his poignant depictions, notably his series on the Great Famine in Bengal during British colonial rule. In 1944, Abedin's famine sketches revealed the harrowing reality of starvation(**Figure 2**) and wandering in hunger(**Figure 4**) using homemade ink on ordinary paper. His stark portrayal of skeletal figures dying by the roadside(**Figure 3**) documented the famine's sinister face, evoking critical acclaim and widespread recognition.



Figure 2: harrowing reality of Starvation



Figure 3: skeletal figures dying by the roadside



Figure 4: Wandering in hunger

Zainul Abedin's artistry unfolds in the sensual portrayal of beautified Santhal women, adorned with flowers. His depiction aims to instill the image of a culturally enriched Bengal, emphasizing the natural beauty of the region. Abedin's subtle representations of rural Bengal act as a means to glorify Bengali tradition amidst marginalization, borrowing aesthetics without overt nationalist iconographies.

In addition to his famine series, Abedin displayed modernist prowess in works like "Two Santhal Women,"(**figure 5**) capturing the essence of Santhal life. However, his impact transcended regional boundaries. A later creation, depicting a Palestinian woman cradling her child amidst conflict, showcased Abedin's timeless ability to channel human suffering into his art. The emotional depth of the piece, reflecting pain, loss, and the uncertainty of life, resonates with the ongoing Palestinian conflict, underscoring Zainul Abedin's enduring legacy as a painter and political activist.

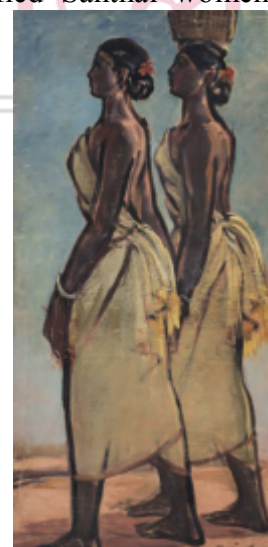


Figure 5: Two Santhal Women

6. CHITTAPROSAD'S REVOLUTIONARY NARRATIVES

Chittaprosad discarded feudal values and placed the life and struggles of common men and women at the center of his paintings. Women, depicted as competent components of society, assumed various roles, representing the diverse facets of their lives. Chittaprosad's commitment to the oppressed class and his imagination made his artworks invaluable, portraying scenes like the birth of a child with meticulous detail.

Chittaprosad's feminist approach in his artworks is a compelling exploration of women's roles and contributions in society, particularly during significant people's movements. His commitment to progressive art stands in contrast to other artists like Souza and Husain, who faced criticism for disrespectful portrayals of women. Chittaprosad, alongside artists like Zainul Abedin, discarded feudal values, placing the life and struggles of common men and women at the center of their paintings.



Figure 6: Woman's struggle



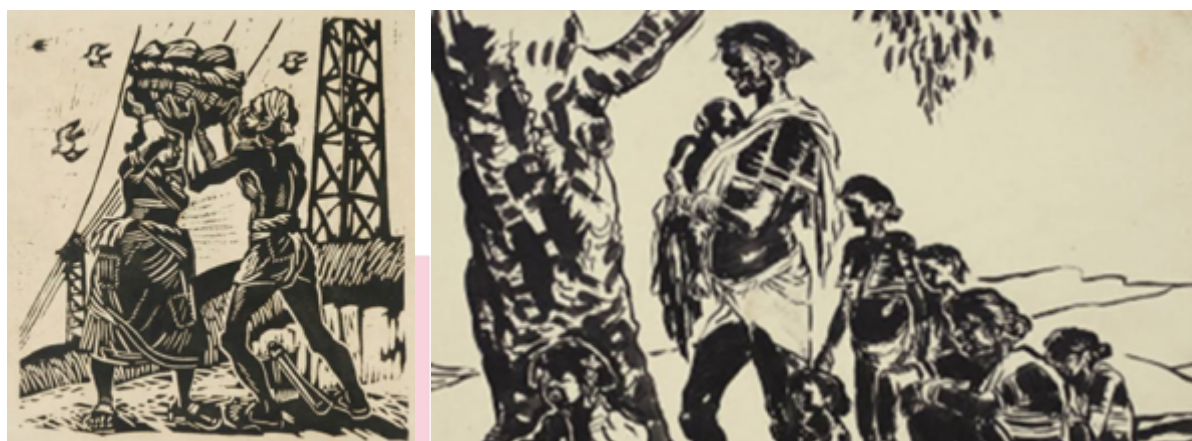
Figure 7: women and the peasant movement

In Chittaprosad's paintings, women are depicted not as commodities for entertainment but as vital contributors to society. The nuanced representation of women as wives, partners in labor, mothers, and independent individuals engaged in various activities reflects his commitment to portraying their multifaceted roles. Unlike some contemporaries, he avoids sycophancy or sensationalism in depicting women, steering clear of demeaning stereotypes.

The All India Kisan Sabha's Vijaywada Conference becomes a significant canvas for Chittaprosad, where women are not only active participants but subjects of his art. The portrayal of peasant women engaging in conversations and discussions during the conference challenges historical norms, as these women had not previously held such positions in Indian art.

Chittaprosad's feminist approach extends to his depiction of lower-class mothers, (Figure 9) paying tribute to their neglected status in both art and society. Through linocuts and portraits, he captures the essence of their lives, emphasizing their significance despite belonging to the lower class. His artistic sensitivity brings forth the struggles, (Figure 6) pleasures, and pains of these mothers, reminiscent of the style of renowned artist Jamini Roy.

Chittaprosad's feminist approach also unfolds in paintings featuring women participating in group labor, (Figure 8) pushing trucks full of stones across ascending slopes. These depictions highlight the strength and resilience of women engaged in ordinary yet extraordinary tasks. His lino cuts portraying Christian women selling chickens or a mother building a road with her child tied on her back showcase the diversity of roles women play in society.



Chittaprosad's artistic repertoire extends beyond black ink and brush to include watercolors, pastels, and oil colors on paper and canvas. His paintings of women and the peasant movement (Figure 7) portray political commitments, emphasizing the importance of mothers in these narratives.

The research concludes by critiquing the contemporary state of Indian art and the division between higher art of the rich class and popular art of the lower class. Chittaprosad's portrayal of integrated laboring classes, connected through shared problems, oppression, and struggles, underscores the significance of people-oriented artists in shaping the concept of contemporary Indian art.

In the context of post-independence India, where societal divisions persist, Chittaprosad's art becomes a powerful tool for understanding and challenging these divisions. His feminist approach, evident in the nuanced portrayal of women, contributes to a more inclusive and representative narrative of Indian society. The responsibility of conceiving and perceiving the concept and assessment of Indian art is presented as a task for people-oriented artists, emphasizing the need for a more holistic and equitable approach to artistic expression.

7. CONCLUSION

Bengal's paintings depicting women are a journey marked by evolving perspectives, challenging stereotypes, and celebrating the diverse roles that women play. From goddesses to everyday women, the canvas has become a space for artists to capture the nuances of

female experiences, contributing to a dynamic and ever-changing artistic tapestry. Each brushstroke tells a story of empowerment, resilience, and the continuous evolution of feminist voices in Bengal's painting history.

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