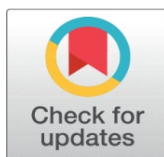


CONTEMPORARY WOMEN ART AND ARTISTS: A STUDY ON FEW FEMALE VISUAL ARTISTS OF ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

Art has always been an open field for women artists and an important tool for social and political articulation from a gender perspective, so they have expressed many forms of repression and discrimination by using various media and by incorporating both traditional and modern-day motifs. A large number of them have been active even in the pre-independence era of India, as the visibility of women-made art production grew, which can be attributed to the prominence of Sunayana Devi of famed Jorasanko Tagore residence of Calcutta and Paris educated painter Amrita Sher-Gil with their pioneering works. My objectives are to study contemporary women artists in Assam in specific of recent time of last 30 years and their concerns on globalization, gender politics and ecology of Assam.

Keywords: Contemporary, Visual Arts, Modernism, Women Artists, and Feminism

1. INTRODUCTION

Women have traditionally played a submissive role to their male counterparts. Woman's place in a predominantly patriarchal society was defined by her ability to be a homemaker, a mother and occasionally a lover in accordance with the dictates of the society. As noted art historian and academician, Parul Dave Mukherjee writes, "The term 'women artists' narrates its own story of suppression borne by the additional word women, and the conflict between unmarked genus (artist) and the marked particularly (women artists) as if conversation between two kinds of marginality, one of woman as victims of violence, and the other of women as artists

and in their role as cultural producers of meaning within the largely patriarchal spaces of art institutions.” [Dave \(2012\)](#)

Feminism has dealt with the belief and aim that woman should have the same rights and opportunities as men rather than busy with reproduction and homemaking which is reflected in all kinds of arts. As described by feminist art critic Lucy Lippard in 1980, proclaiming feminism as opposed to modernism, “Feminist methods and theories have instead offered a socially concerned alternative to the increasingly mechanical evolution of art about art. The 1970s might not have been pluralist at all if women had not emerged during the decade to introduce the multicoloured threads of female experience into the fabric of modern art.” [Lippard \(1995\)](#) Modernism was highly patriarchal or male-controlled, according to feminists, and postmodernism was a political win against a previously male-dominated aesthetic culture. Many female artists, on the other hand, observe masculine culture at work and have attempted to utilise tactics to urge artistic endeavours to be redirected towards an aesthetics more particularly inspired by identity and gender politics. Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman, Levine, Judy Chicago, Gorilla Girls, and others have often sought to inject a substantial dosage of gender critique into artistic processes through the use of 'appropriation.

As an eminent writer, Tim Woods writes, “Feminist art organisations like WAR (Women Artists in Revolution) were established in the 1960s to combat the male-dominated art world, and these were accompanied by journals as Women and Art (1971) and Feminist Art Journal (1972). Feminist artists distinguish themselves by deliberately addressing feminist issues in the content and form of their work, arguing that the goals of feminism ought not to be incorporated as a new ‘ism’ into the wealth of pluralist postmodernism.” [Woods \(2007\)](#) Early modern women artists of Pre Independence period India as Sunayani Devi and Amrita Sher Gil set commenced the breakthrough with their unique vision and dedication towards creative journey in creating some unique paintings amongst the male counterparts in the modern art world.

ART ACTIVITIES SINCE PRE-INDEPENDENCE INDIA AS ACTIVE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN ARTISTS AND THEIR CREATIONS OF MANIFESTATION PEOPLE, LIVELIHOOD AND ALSO SURROUNDINGS WITH GREATER AWARENESS OF TRADITION AND MODERNITY

Figure 1



Figure 1 Amrita Sher-Gil, Three Girls, oil on canvas, 92.8X66.5 cm, 1935
Source (Courtesy: National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi)

Figure 2

Figure 2 Arpita Singh, Untitled, Water colour, acrylic, and ink on paper, 40X27.5 cm, 2018
Source (Courtesy: www.saffron.com)

The paper on particularly women artists is dedicated to the female/feministic marking self-identity/ nationalism through what one may call the emblematic selfhood of a woman protagonist as Amrita Sher-Gil [Figure 1](#) and Sunayana Devi of Pre- Independence India. As Eminent art historian, Geeta Kapur writes, "With a later generation of artists as Nalini Malani and Arpita Singh [Figure 2](#) she is more specifically concerned with the transactions that take place between private fantasy and public concern on the basis of gender. She also tries to figure out how these two contemporaries are able to avoid the heroic roles associated with nationalism in order to claim a more uncertainly socialised subjectivity in their own right. According to her, an authentic female experience is sought in order to distinguish between the feminist rendering of reality and truth; the criteria must be removed from the existentialist frame in order to accomplish this. It is possible for feminism to propose didactic and tendentious aesthetic within a historicalized context of cultural production, rather than duplicate and correct the hegemonic overtones of humanist notions such as (male) sovereignty." [Kapur \(2000\)](#)

Contemporary generation of women artists in India since 1980 onwards as example Mrinalini Mukherjee, Arpana Kaur, Nilima Shekh, Arpita Singh, Nalini Malani, Anita Dube, Pushpamala N., Shila Gowda, Surekha, Archana Hande, Mithu Sen's works of art create an unconventional inclination and atmosphere of emergent perception among women thinkers and artists for not only the quest of personal self and political, but also for evolving new feelings in art that are distinctly felt in the content, pictorial language and the visual allegories. [Mago \(2001\)](#)

PRIME CREDENTIALS OF CREATIONS ON CONTEMPORARY FEMALE ARTISTS OF ASSAM CONCERNING VISUAL ARTIST SALEHA AHMED, HELA DAS, LUTFA AKHTAR, ARCHANA RAJGURU, SANTANA GOHAIN, SUDIPTA DAS AND RASHMIMALA

As noted Assamese writer and art historian Dr.Mousumi Kandali writes, "In contemporary Assam, most of the aggressive socio-political consequences are ironically rooted in such paradoxes of modernist experiences. On the whole, it is a justifiable historical discourse of political empowerment or subaltern making a voice, but it is also a manifestation of the aggressive nihilism of modernity whereby it takes an auto-destructive terrifying form. The contending binaries of masculinise

versus feminism, rural versus urban or tribalism against non-tribalism gets further problematized in such structural settings of political chaos.” [Kandali \(2002\)](#)

According to Nilamani Phookan Pragya Das, sister of famed artist Pratap Baruah was possibly first female modern painter from Assam. Her one landscape painting has kept in the collection of District Museum, Tezpur. [Phookan \(1998\)](#) Hemangini Bardoloi was another doyen female painter who was passed diploma courses in fine arts at Kala Bhavana, Visva Bharati, Santiniketan in the year 1957. Born in the year of 1925 and daughter of Famed Pre Independence artist Suren Bardoloi, Hemangini Bardoloi’s numerous works reflect stylistic vividness and lyrical sensitiveness of her figurative compositions in late Bengal School style.

Contemporary women artists in Assam of last 40 years have been discussed in the paper with their individualistic approach female/feministic marking self-identity/ nationalism and their creative journey. Contemporary female artists in Assam as Saleha Ahmed, Hela Das, Lutfa Akhtar, Archana Rajguru, Santana Gohain, Sudipta Das and Rashmimala are discussed in the paper with their unique vision, avant-garde pictorial language and metaphors amongst large numbers of male counterparts.

Figure 3



Figure 3 Sculpture by Saleha Ahmed
Source (Courtesy of the artist)

Figure 4

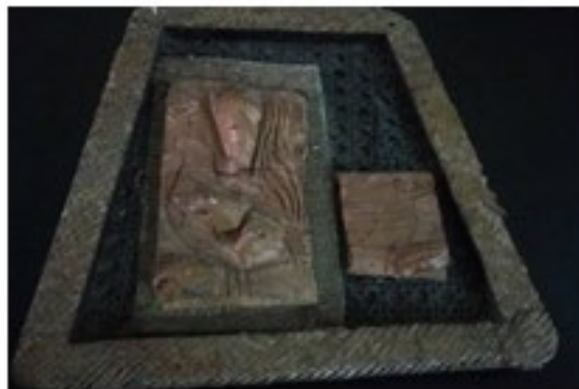


Figure 4 Relief work by Saleha Ahmed
Source (Courtesy of the artist)

Figure 5



Figure 5 Hela Das, Kneel drift, wood

Source (Image courtesy Assam Fine Arts and Crafts Society website)

Figure 6



Figure 6 Sculpture of Hela Das

Source (Image courtesy www.facebook.com/KamalMahanta)

During early seventies of last century two women artists Saleha Ahmed born (1947) and Hela Das studied at Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan and Faculty of Fine Arts, M. S University of Baroda and both artists has achieved degree with specialization in sculpture. As eminent art historian mentions their bold, significant presence in the art scene with more physical energy with hammer and chisel instead of previous female artists of using paint and brush. [Kandali \(2011\)](#) Lives and works in Jorhat Saleha Ahmed have been exploring various medium as clay, terracotta, bronze and mix media. In her works abstract figuration and folk appearance has been conveyed through her figurative compositions [Figure 3](#) [Figure 4](#) as inspired from primitive art and British modern sculptor monumental, intellectual character. Eminent poet, art critic Nilmani Phookan has given title of his writing on sculpture of Saleha Ahmed

as the visible sensation and truth of touch and he writes Saleha Ahmed a prolific modeller although she works in other sculptural medium as carving, welding time to time. Phookan (2013) Hela Das, based in Guwahati died two years back, worked mainly in wood carving medium. In her sculptural compositions Figure 5 and Figure 6 of emotive human face, female figures have been done with aesthetical vigour, warmth, and vitality as similar to existence of man and nature.

Figure 7



Figure 7 Lutf Akhtar, Dream, oil on canvas, 24X24 inches

Source (Courtesy of the artist)

Another prominent name of woman painter from Assam is Lutf Akhtar who studied bachelor's degree in Painting at Faculty of Fine Arts, M. S. University of Baroda during eighties of last century. Since then, she lives and works in Guwahati. Her figurative paintings in both oil and acrylic medium, drawings in various in various medium depict predominantly woman's solitude, loneliness, and rebellion in the pictorial space of her compositions in oil on canvases as titled Dream Figure 7 and Tapashiya Figure 8

Figure 8



Figure 8 Lutf Akhtar, Tapashiya, oil on canvas, 24X24 inches

Source (Courtesy of the artist)

Born Jorhat, Assam in the year 1971, Archana Rajguru Biswas is another remarkable name of contemporary woman artists in India who studied bachelor's degree in Painting at Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan and did postgraduate in Graphic Arts at Faculty of Fine Arts, M. S. University of Baroda. After that she taught in various places as a senior faculty at NID, Ahmedabad. She has also worked as an animator with some prestigious animation studios of Hyderabad. Presently Archana lives and works in Hyderabad.

In her early works of tempera painting and lithography, sad, intense melancholic human protagonists in monochrome were predominantly dominant in the pictorial space. But her recent partially three-dimensional works has been done in a surprisingly, new, innovative way working mostly with yarns as her medium. Being a complex person, she used to stitch complex pattern on pieces of clothes, creating semi abstract and extremely expressive and expressionistic images with plain running stitches. Her recent works are however of a completely different and unique genre by themselves- masks made with the crochet needle and yarn as her protagonist image [Figure 9](#) As curator Chandrma Bhattacharyya writes, Archana current works in the show entitled 14- Kaleidoscope of Different Realities at Janus Art Gallery, Kolkata are not just completely had crafted , but in a medium that is traditionally considered feminine. Her works largely with yarns, handling of the yarn in different manners excites her aesthetic senses, which itself sets her apart as a creative person.”

Figure 9



Figure 9 Archana Rajguru, Subhendu, woollen yarn on crocheted on papier mache Glass marbles and Nepalese paper, 21X8X6 inches, 2021

Source (Image courtesy of the artist)

Born in 1969, Guwahati, Assam, Santana Bardoloi, later changed surname as married to eminent sculptor Ganesh Gohain received her bachelor's degree in Print Making at the Government College of Art and Crafts, Guwahati, Assam. She then went on to study at the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda where she received her post-diploma in printmaking. “Santana Gohain uses language as the medium for carrying her thoughts. The difference between abstract and real does not exist in

Gohain's work, as she believes that anything that exists in the mind and materially on paper is more than real. Gohain uses the human tendency towards 'curiosity' as an inspiration for her work. This process of using her curiosity to create her work is important for Gohain to realize her existence and her language."

Santana Gohain's works have featured in some solo exhibitions at the Fine Art Company, Mumbai, in 2002 and 2000; and Nazar Art Gallery, Baroda, in 1999. Group exhibitions that have showcased her work include, 'At Walden Pond' and 'Black and White in the Horizon' at Gallery Beyond, Mumbai, in 2011; 'Cutting Chai' at Sarjan Art Gallery, Vadodara, and 'Some Icebergs Easy to Avoid' at Bose Pacia, New York, in 2009; 'Master's Corner' at Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai; 'Baroda: A Tale of Two Cities' at Sarjan Art Gallery, Vadodara; 'Point and Line to Plane VI' at Gallery Beyond, Mumbai; and 'Contradictions and Complexities: Contemporary Art From India', at d.e.n. contemporary art and Western Projects, Culver City, in 2008. Gohain received a Junior Fellowship from the Ministry of Human Resource Development, New Delhi, from 1999-2001. Her early graphic prints as Existence [Figure 10](#) done in dry point (1999) and Untitled [Figure 11](#) in the woodcut (2004) shows her fascination for private fantasy and minimal execution within the smaller pictorial surfaces.

Figure 10

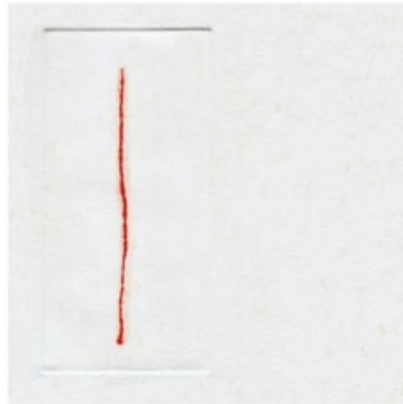


Figure 10 Santana Gohain, Existence, Dry point, 30X30 cm, 1999
Source Courtesy: Santana Gohain (Courtesy of the artist)

Figure 11



Figure 11 Santana Gohain, Untitled, woodcut, 21X21 cm, 2001
Source (Courtesy: www.artnewsnviews.com)

Especially dry point titled Existence reflects her early desire for the abstraction of multiple layers and womanhood itself. As Dr. Mousumi Kandali praises Santana Gohain as among powerful woman abstract artists of India. She describes her feeling as viewing Santana Gohain's work of art titled Existence at residence of eminent poet Prof. Nilmani Phookan and overwhelms with multiple layers and minimal sensitivity of the work of art. [Kandali \(2011\)](#)

Figure 12

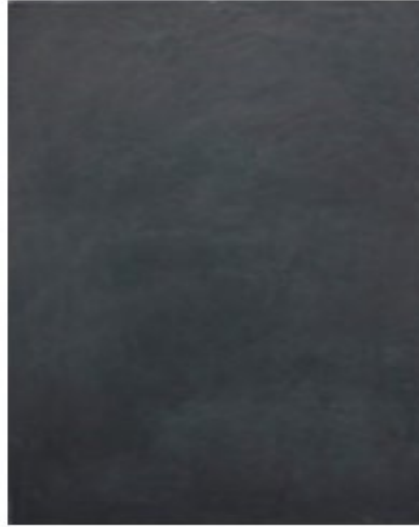


Figure 12 Santana Gohain, Untitled, Oil on board, 182.9X121.9 cm, 2004

Source (Courtesy: www.saffron.com)

As an abstract artist, Santana Gohain's earlier works reflect the fascination she developed for the industrial surroundings of her then, studio. Through intensive observation and sensuous absorption of the nature of these hard materials and heavy industrial processes, she developed paintings, which were dark, leaden, black or charcoal grey, tinged with rust coloured smears [Figure 12](#) These works are large, six feet high and four feet wide, with thick sides like great, monolithic slabs of heavy metal and when lined up in the gallery, they emanate a sense of implacable presence.

The recent new paintings we are now considering, reflect a very different environment, a significantly softer textural world, but one equally dense and dynamic. The artist has mentioned how significant the colour red seemed to her in childhood paintings, growing up in Assam. She lived in a beautiful and constantly changing landscape, with vibrant colours of flowers like Simuli and Palash in bloom, and sunsets on the river Brahmaputra, glowing with orange and magenta. She was also aware of the red colour prevalent in the weaving and printed patterns of traditional dress, especially during festivals. Another painting which again contains approximately three hundred flower motifs, this time, of roses, comes alive in dim light [Figure 13](#) Each rose flower and stem, faintly delineated, is a uniquely drawn variation of the motif, in the colours of rosewood and each, has a kind of waxy sheen. Eminent British sculptor Peter Bevan termed Santana's work as Invisible movement and write, "Rows of dark paintings lined the walls and it was only as I walked towards these and began to look into them, that I discovered they were coming alive."

Figure 13



Figure 13 Santana Gohain, Untitled, acrylic on board, 91.5X152 cm, 2015
Source (Courtesy: www.saffron.com)

New generation of women artists as Sudipta Das and Rashmimala originally belongs to Assam though residing outside Assam; deal with native important issues as displacement of people and botanical art. Sudipta Das work titled A Soaring to nowhere, 2018 [Figure 14](#) worries on the non-existence and displacement of refugees through the figures which are suspended in the void.

Figure 14



Figure 14 Sudipta Das, A Soaring to Nowhere, 2018
Source (Courtesy of the artist)

Figure 15

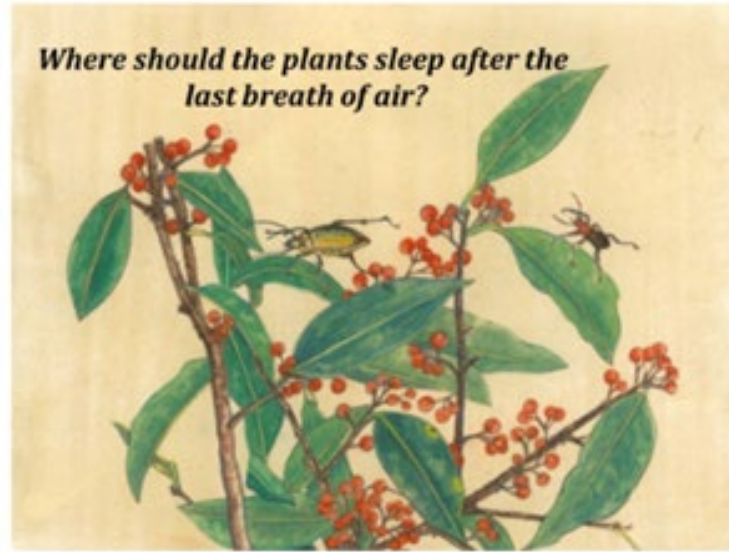


Figure 15 Rashmimala, where should the plants sleep after the last breath of air, 2021
Source (Courtesy of the artist)

Another important painter Rashmala's work of titled Where should the plants sleep after the last breath of air, 2021 [Figure 15](#) reflects her introspective commitment with the interface of ecology and art- drawing from a variety of sources such as museum collections, archival document, academic scholarship, field data and genre of botanical art.

2. OBJECTIVES

- To find visual art activities since Pre- Independence India, Assam and after Independence as the active participation of women artists and their creations of manifestation of people, livelihood and also surroundings with greater awareness of tradition and modernity
- To discuss prime credentials of creations on contemporary female artists of Assam regarding few visual artist Saleha Ahmed, Hela Das, Lutfa Akhtar, Archana Rajguru, Santana Gohain, Sudipta Das and Rashmimala

3. METHODOLOGY

Primary and secondary sources are included in the data. The primary sources for text and visual information are the woman artists' original paintings and prints, as well as numerous books, catalogues, and brochures. Books, journals, reviews, the internet, and other secondary sources are all available. Original works of art and prints by artists from different periods will be given special consideration in this study. The methodology for the study is determined by conducting interviews with specific woman artists as well as visiting the actual site to acquire relevant data, pictures, and performing research via the internet. This is a descriptive type of research, and because the study is focused on the stylistic changes and technical innovations of women artists in Assam and other parts of India, visits to various institutions and professional individual activities, happenings in Assam and other

parts of India have been made, along with proper documentation of both primary and secondary sources using photography and video

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In the art world of male artists' domination, existence of woman artists are very limited, less in numbers due to misconception in our society as not permitting art training to women. In the book *Ways of Seeing* Marxist thinker, art historian John Berger wrote as, "Men look at women, women watch themselves being looked at. Woman body has been treated as model for male counterparts in which model becomes part of their creation as a sexually appealing object through their male gaze and very less numbers of creations of women artists has been collected in the museums of all over the world." Berger (2009) But time and context has been changed now, women are getting equal rights some extent. The contexts of creations by women artists in India and all over the world of the 20th century has been much more complex, personal and in many cases political as well. Through the creation of narratives with the help of intimate objects, myths and experience the artists wanted to awaken inner self and the other. This kind of consciousness has been truly reflected in the works of contemporary female artists in Assam as Saleha Ahmed, Hela Das, Lutfa Akhtar, Archana Rajguru, Santana Gohain, Sudipta Das and Rashmimala whereas global context, personal nostalgia of peripheral homeland Assam and feminine being, agony become text and the process of creation.

Colonial impositions still preoccupy educational system in North-eastern India especially towards art education as taking it as marginal by both governing authority and also some pseudo mind-set of intellectual society. I think in this juncture discussions, roundtables on art education and practice particularly for the benefit of woman artists are necessary involving all responsible stakeholders as UGC, NCERT, all government and non- government organization/art galleries as Lalit Kala Akademi, Indira Gandhi Centre for Arts, Asia Art Archive and etc.

5. CONCLUSION

Contemporary art in India shines globally today with contribution of individual and collaborative efforts and thought process by woman artists as Nalini Malani, Bharti Kher, Mrinalini Mukherjee, Nasreen Mohammedi and many more. For me, these artists work of arts itself speak womanhood, abstract, minimal pictorial purity whereas material as a metaphor. In whole Northeast India woman has a major role in the society as well as home among various ethnic communities. The study discusses contemporary women artists in Assam over the last 40 years, their distinctive approach to female/feministic marking self-identity/nationalism, and their artistic path. Saleha Ahmed, Hela Das, Lutfa Akhtar, Archana Rajguru, Santana Gohain, Sudipta Das and Rashmimala are among the contemporary female painters in Assam who are discussed in the paper for their creativity, unique vision, avant-garde pictorial language, metaphors, and use of materials among a huge number of male creative artists. These contemporary women artists in Assam are thriving hard to establish their individuality and become path finders among whole generation of women artists in Assam as well as North-eastern States. Their works of art are perfect examples based on woman issues, feminist point of view, also achieving utmost technical and aesthetical excellence. Saleha Ahmed, Hela Das, Lutfa Akhtar senior among the group of woman artists which I have mentioned, got national acclamation and appreciation from critic and general viewers for their personal approach of themes and material in their works. Santana Gohain and Sudipata Das

has got international exposure and applause from both connoisseur and critic for their concepts related to gender issues and processes of alternative material/discourse as site specific installation art and material as papier Mache and printmaking. This paper has tried to trace, highlight the trajectory behind it.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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