

# A METAMORPHIC ANALYSIS OF FEMALE FORMS IN INDIAN PAINTINGS: MODERN & CONTEMPORARY PERIOD

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**Received** 28 September 2022  
**Accepted** 09 November 2022  
**Published** 25 November 2022

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## DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v3.i2.2022.219](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v3.i2.2022.219)

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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## ABSTRACT

A piece of art, if analyzed comprehensively, is built with the amalgamation of its formal and conceptual facets. These formal and conceptual aspects are intertwined so intimately that one cannot exist without the other. Since time immemorial, 'Women' is one of the most acclaimed concepts in Indian art. Female body has been represented and identified through various forms and concepts with the shift in time and space. The present research paper is an analytical study of those transformations through which female forms in Indian paintings have undergone. It also focuses on how a finite concept 'Women' has been indigenously explored in creative forms by numerous artists, which encompasses a wide range of visualizations of women, from Abanindranath's fragile depictions to voluptuous nudes of Souza with enlarged genitals, from tranquility in images of Ara to blank-faced images of Hussain. The adopted methodology for this paper is descriptive and observational with an aim of exploring the different approaches in the depiction of the female body and its formal evolution with time. The paper primarily considers the female impression by Abanindranath Tagore, Amrita Shergill, F N Souza, K H Ara, M F Husain and Gogi Saroj Pal and few other artists. The research favorably concludes that there has been a great role of artistic trends, personal psychic tendencies of artists as well as concurrent socio-political situations that prompted artists to characterize women in varied forms.

**Keywords:** Formal, Female, Modern, Indian Art, Portrayal of Women

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A work of art, if analyzed as a whole, is found to be a combination of its formal and conceptual aspects. These formal and conceptual aspects are intertwined so closely that the existence of one cannot be imagined without that of the other. As the name suggests, formal aspects are concerned with the physical features of the artwork such as: methods of use of forms, colors, tone, texture, specific arrangement of compositional elements and all other technical aspects. These elements do include from the very initial reaction to the overall impression of the spectator. Whereas conceptual aspects are those concerned with the theme or the idea

employed in it. Conceptual elements include the ideology and perception of the artist which he pours out by creating visual forms. Forms are a medium to express the idea. It will not be an exaggeration to say that the formal dimension of art is the body, and the conceptual dimension is the soul of art. Idea has always been emphasized by philosophical perspective, nevertheless the significance of formal style could not be neglected.

Furthermore, for a single and limited content, there is much space for artistic expression in terms of forms to be explored and experimented. Representation of women is one of the most celebrated themes in Indian art history since ancient times. In the sculptures of Harappa and Mohenjo Daro female figures are embodied as a symbol of fertility and welfare through creating gestures of nudity and dance with utmost grace. The same feminine content takes the form of erotic art when depicted with fully grown breasts and highly rhythmic sensual postures in 64 yogini temples of Khajuraho. Female forms are conceptualized as deities Mahapratishara and Tara attributing repose and serenity in Buddhist art. We find a myriad of expressions of female forms in Mughal and Rajput Art which flourished at the same time. Focusing on the Mughal Era, it is observed that female forms in art were highly affected by the social status of women. During the sultanate period women were restricted inside the harem and not allowed to step outside. Because of certain customs such as Polygamy, Purdah system; women of this era could not enjoy a pleasant position, which is clearly reflected in Mughal Art, being shown either covering their face in a transparent veil or at least covering their head in it. Women were kept in harem as slaves for the sake of amusement of Mughal emperors. Hence, Mughal Art was confined to portray only the luster and charm of feminine beauty through gaudy and transparent attires. Whereas Rajput art was abundant in romantic elements in its females because of exaggerated imaginative and idealistic features such as almond shaped half-closed eyes, pointed nose and graceful postures, which is clearly epitomized in *Bani- Thani*. Instead of carnal components, one could get a glimpse of spiritual love in paintings of Meera, of Radha-Krishna, Gopis and Raas Leela themed paintings of the Rajput period. Soon with British arrival there emerged several academic painters whose techniques were radically influenced by European art. Raja Ravi Varma and MF Pithawala were amongst them. Both of their female figures have dramatic and statuesque essence, highly dominated by western ideals of art, and based on pre assumed notions of feminine beauty, manifested in *Shakuntala*, *Lady with lemon*, *The Milkmaid*, *portrait of a Parsi girl*, *Lady Illicit* etc. The ladies appearing in their paintings from different Indian communities are characterized by their mannerism and dressing styles. [Mitter \(2007\)](#) The figures stylized in folk sensibilities by Jamini Roy were veritably simplifications of fundamental forms, which he continued adopting in his women representations; *Three women*, *Mother and Child* series also. These representations were the result of bright pop colors, strong dark outlines, and several experiments with textures. Later the Progressive Artist Group that arose in 1947, reconstructed the modern art scenario. Their art was a result of composite Indian art history and modernist approach of the West. The most recognized member M F Hussain has composed infinite paintings of female (nude and semi-nude) as his subject. He painted the Indian religious figures and his muses with sensuous appeal. On contrary, Hussain's contemporary- F N Souza painted devil-like forms of women with massive genitals, unusual faces, and distorted bodies. [Dalmia \(2001\)](#) Further shifting to contemporary art, Indian feminist artist Gogi Saroj Pal presented the women-oriented experiences in her paintings. Conflicting the male dominated culture of society, Pal's nudes are a remembrance of her self-interpretation. On the other hand, Jatin das acquired amorous and erotic women in his paintings.

Thus, a female has been depicted in various identities and forms since the ancient age to the contemporary times. There have been diverse factors that contributed to the framing of these discrete female forms. The present research thus attempts to portray the varied forms through which woman has been characterized. Considering the fact that female form has been widely expressed by several artists, this research examines selected works of only Abanindranath Tagore, Amrita Shergill, M F Hussain, K H Ara, F N Souza, Gogi Saroj Pal and Jatin Das. Seeing that the mentioned artists belong to certain periods, the research delves into the gradually changing formal elements in female figure that developed over time.

### Abanindranath Tagore and Amrita Shergill: A Sensual representation

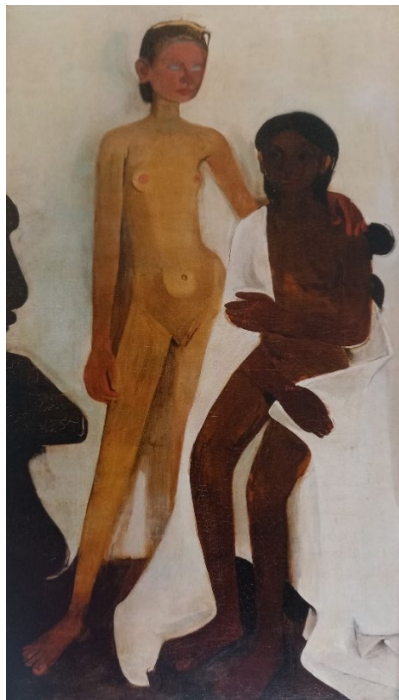
Women in Abanindranath Tagore's paintings hold soft expressions not only on face but also in hand gestures and physical postures. They reflect the expressions of motherhood as in *BharatMata* (1905), *my mother* (1913), *Ganesh Janani* (1908). A fairly large number of his paintings represent women in mythological and historical roles as in *Ashoka's Queen*, *the Goddess Abhaya in dharmaketu's hut*, *Vasantsena*, *Buddha and Sujata* etc. Art of Abanindranath is assumed to be an amalgamation of Western, Irani, Chinese, Japanese idols, but in terms of subjects his art was purely Indian. It was in his technique that external impacts could be seen. The female figures in his paintings were criticized for extraordinarily soft tones, being overly sentimental, weak drawing, a gloomy color scheme which expresses a melancholic mood and use of unsaturated color. Mostly his feminine structures are realistic and have fragile alliances with an exception in *BharatMata*, where the feminine symbol of awakening for freedom movement is picturized empowered. Partition of Bengal happened in 1905 and set the foundation for this artwork. Chaggar (2019) The lady who is visualized as Mother India is wearing saffron apparel, has four hands, holding a book, sheaves of rice, a piece of white cloth and a Rudraksha mala. (Figure 1)

**Figure 1**



**Figure 1** (left) Abanindranath Tagore, Bharat Mata, c. 1905

Source [https://dublin02.azureedge.net/sob/abanindranath-tagore-and-bharat-mata\\_](https://dublin02.azureedge.net/sob/abanindranath-tagore-and-bharat-mata_)

**Figure 2**

**Figure 2** (right) Amrita Shergill, *Two Girls*, 1919,  
**Source** [Sundaram \(2010\)](#). Amrita Shergill, a self-portrait in letters and writings. New Delhi.

The idea of Bharat Mata both as a female force and as a Goddess, was initially conceptualized in the poem *Vande Mataram* and in the novel *Anandamath* by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee to which Abanindranath gave a visual form. His intent was always to fully cover his female characters in traditional attires in his paintings unlike few of his contemporaries like Haren Majumdar. [Parimoo \(2011\)](#)

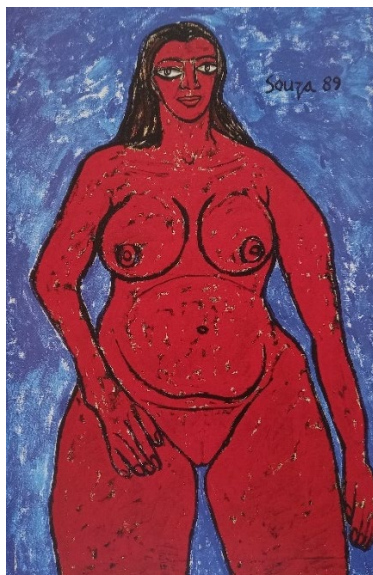
The female forms that appeared in paintings of Amrita Shergill evolved through mainly two prominent phases. In each of the phases, there is great abundance of her self-discovery through her self-portraits, model studies and nudes. The first phase incorporated the paintings purely influenced from European art style where she has chosen her friends, family, and fellow students from Paris as content and post-impressionist brush strokes. She did not hesitate in adopting and executing Western ideas in her works. Instead of representing Goddesses or court scenes or renowned public personalities she chose to draw unreferenced common women in her paintings. The simple attires, the local elements succeeded in bringing out the Indianness in her paintings. Mostly she preferred a group of two or three or more figures rather than one central figure while composing. [Sundaram \(2010\)](#) In *two girls* we see two girls sitting side by side together yet manifested with a sense of liberation indicated by the different colors of their bodies as well as different facial expressions they hold. ([Figure 2](#)) Her obsession and curiosity with nudes for which once she was expelled from the art School of Italy, had inevitably something to do with her bisexuality as revealed from the letter written by Shergill to her mother. However, the nudes in her art were intended to be a means of self-exploration instead of expressing eroticism. The second phase was marked by her attention towards Indian rural women when she settled in a village near Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh. Now her style of work was notably inspired from the Bengal School artists, Ajanta caves, Mughal, and Pahari miniatures. [Britannica \(2022\)](#) She produced

village ladies doing daily chores such as grinding turmeric, taking rest in monochromes to depict the gloomy mood. Occasionally, in a group of several figures painted in earthly tones, she emphasized on the main one by using bright saturated colors as in the *bride's toilet*. Image of an ordinary Indian woman is portrayed in her paintings with detailed gestures in single flat colors which reveals the hopelessness and monotonous way of life.

### F N Souza, K H ARA, and M F Hussain: Western encounters in Female form

Then with the emergence of progressive artist group in 1947, leading artists such as M F Husain, F N Souza and K H Ara portrayed women in various forms. F N Souza entirely escaped the beauty and gentle attitude of women. He extensively gave preference to fat bodies with huge genitals, strange faces, and distorted figures. The frequent women representation in his paintings has been done using vibrant colors and powerful brush strokes. [Sharma and Gupta \(2014\)](#) For instance, [\(Figure 3\)](#) Souza paints a standing nude woman in rich red against a blue background. The face of the woman is comparatively small with the body being dramatically enlarged. The outline of the figure is done in black bold strokes. Having a frontal gaze, she seems to appear exotic and appealing to the viewer. The voluptuous nude in semi abstract form is another favored element in Souza's paintings. Similarly in other paintings the women are depicted with a distorted face and body. Line and color treatment and gestures are bizarre. But the style of enlarging the genitals is the same. Curious attitude and fascination for females led to numerous nude paintings by Souza. Although he was inspired by erotic Indian temple imagery which are associated with fertility, Souza's paintings neglect those aspects and dominates with sexuality. His paintings are contrary to the predetermined forms of women found in Chitrasutra that women must be beautiful, elegant, fair complexion and well proportionate. Breaking the perception of beauty of women as depicted in most Indian paintings, Souza creates demonic figures with stark vibrant colors, disproportionate figures, and strange gestures. [\(Figure 4\)](#) His figures are bold, full of lust, ugly which represent the socio-political questions associated with the objectification of women. [Souza \(2009\)](#)

**Figure 3**



**Figure 3** (left) F N Souza, Untitled, oil on canvas, 1989,  
Source [Souza \(2009\)](#). Dhoomimal Gallery.

**Figure 4**

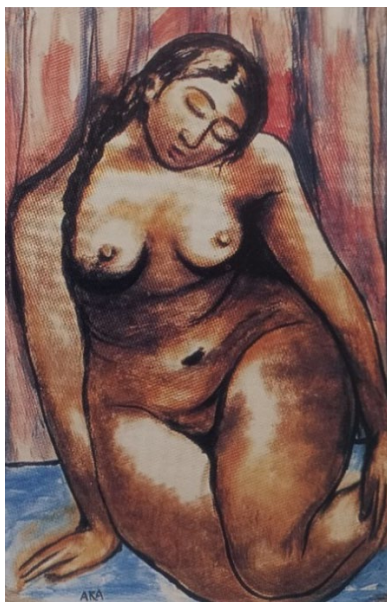


**Figure 4 (right)** F N Souza, Lady in black, Tempera on paper, 1962,

**Source** <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/francis-newton-souza-lady-in-black>

To the contrary K H Ara have portrayed a very calm, sensuous, and simple version of the female form. His nudes represent a gentle and clear idea of beauty as perceived by him. Since Ara had a strong influence of the French masters, he painted numerous nudes in classical posture. Comfortable with their nudity, women in Ara's painting are simply lying down, sitting or daydreaming. Still lives, vases and flowers are some recurrent motifs that surround the women. Her gaze hardly meets the spectator, because some women are hiding their faces and others facing backwards. Ara paints the figure with expressionistic reference. They are rendered

**Figure 5**



**Figure 5 (left)** K H Ara, Untitled, Watercolour on paper,

**Source** Dalmia (2001). The Making of Modern Indian art. Oxford University Press.

Figure 6



**Figure 6** (right) M F Husain, Untitled (Praying Woman), Oil on canvas, 1958,

**Source** <https://www.sothebys.com/en/buy/auction/2019/modern-and-contemporary-south-asian-art-n>

with raw and monochromatic hues in a technique similar to impasto. The figures are generally dark skinned with strong outlines. Although the figures are voluptuous and fleshy, similar to the figures of Souza, they are innocent of sexuality. [Dalmia \(2001\)](#) The nudes by Ara seems to wear clothes of unerotic tones and texture. [\(Figure 5\)](#) Further moving onto Hussain, he blended Indian sentiment and traditional art forms with European modernism, creating a unique visual style. His works have a deep implication of expressionistic distortion. Hussain has painted numerous female figures particularly of the Hindu Goddesses, the mother figure, and Virgin Mary as an essence of sensuality. The figures generally have rigid posture and enclosed with tools, animals, signs, and symbols. Similar to Ara, Husain's female faces are hidden from the viewer's gaze. The rendering of the figures with flat planes of vibrant color occurs to be two dimensional. As in the painting 'Praying woman' the figure is placed contrary to geometrical background. The figure painted in abstraction has stiff posture and large rough hands and feet. It is rendered with light blue and white blocks of color and strongly outline in red. [\(Figure 6\)](#) "As I do not recall my mother's visage most of my female figures have no face details," says Husain. Overall Husain's female figures are not particularly beautiful, but a distinct characteristic of Indian culture is beautifully captured. [Chandra \(2012\)](#)

### Gogi Saroj Pal and Jatin Das: Revisiting Feminist identity

Further if we look at the paintings of Gogi Saroj Pal, we experience a strong and natural womanism similar to Amrita Shergill. Gogi Saroj Pal is an established contemporary feminist artist known for exploring the deep-rooted interior lives of women. Women's essence, her aspirations, her obligations, and complicated mythical world of her have been Gogi's recurrent subjects. An incredible fusion of Hindu mythology and her imagination can be seen in her paintings. Compositions of *Nayika*, *Eternal bird*, *Kamdhenu*, *Kumari*, *mother*, and *child Hat-yogini* etc. all seem to be visions of her dreams, giving a distinct character to her paintings. [Indian Contemporary, Post-Independence. \(2007\)](#) She is exclusively known for painting

half human and half animal hybrid creatures. These composite characters have a certain symbolism which is a result of her experience from religious myths and rituals. With time, Gogi Saroj Pal's painting shifted from realistic to simpler and stylized female forms. The female protagonists in her paintings represent the sensual qualities but at the same time she appears to be adjusting herself within some boundaries. As notable in 'Kamdhenu', the composite figure struggles to break the margins of the surface. Kamdhenu is painted in shades of white and gray, and her fingers and feet in red color suggesting the practice of *mehndi* or *alta*. The naked yet sensual figure looks depressed, victim of

**Figure 7**



**Figure 7 (left)** Gogi Saroj Pal, Kamdhenu, Gouache on paper, 1995,  
Source <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/gogi-saroj-pal-kamdhenu-1>

**Figure 8**



**Figure 8 (right)** Jatin Das, Man-Woman, Oil on canvas, 1982,  
Source [Indian Contemporary, Post-Independence. \(2007\)](#). Vadhera art gallery.



social injustice and her tilted head, limp limbs and folded hand indicates her helplessness. (Figure 7) Generally the faces in Pal's painting are masked with heavy makeup, large eyes, protruding red lips and a certain kind of gentle smile suggesting the freedom of feminine. Sharma (2018) The female protagonist is given prominence by leaving the background empty and color blocked, giving an idea of isolation in a woman's life. As the background is free of motifs or any other kind of element, so is the body. There is no ornamentation or apparel, but the color texture used gives an illusion of dressing. Though the figures are naked they do not offer any kind of seduction, visual pleasure; rather their sexuality is for themselves. Coming up to Jatin Das, he is an artist who attempted to explore charismatic means of depicting human figures. His paintings reflect affiliation between man and woman such as emotional tension, confession, betrayal, crisis etc., in which he briefly paints nude female figures. Seeking inspiration from Michelangelo, Jatin Das portrayed his female figures with huge muscular body. (Figure 8) The linear composition and quick brushwork add special dimension in his work. Using various mediums like ink, watercolor, oil colors, Jatin Das tends to give life to his characters. Punja (2003)

## 2. CONCLUSION

From the primitive times, female individuality has been furnished by her physical appearance and sexuality. Earlier the formal delineation of women was done either as Goddesses or an ordinary woman. And in both the portrayals well-proportioned, sensuality, delicacy and patriarchal dominance has been taken well care of. Since there are numerous formal representations of female figure by various artists of different ages, this research was focused on the female portrayal by Abanindranath Tagore, Amrita Shergill, F N Souza, K H Ara, M F Husain, Gogi Saroj Pal, and Jatin Das. The study successfully demonstrated the diverse illustration of the mentioned artists. Starting from the colonial times it seems that Raja Ravi Verma introduced the decorative element in the portrayal of women. The western impression was the leading cause of this sensual display, which is evident in the gestures, body curves and treatment of tones. Later the leading personality of modern Indian art, Abanindranath Tagore developed his individual style by depicting Indian figures with foreign techniques. He represented women either with a political cause or with romantic and sensuous approach. Then with the arrival of progressive artists the former representation of women was sexually projected in a more retrogressive way. As in the paintings of F N Souza, the formal appearance of women serves to form the ultimate harshness on the canvas. He perceived people as devils masked under human forms and thus his treatment of female as a subject is demonic. The study also establishes some similarities and dissimilarities between the work of Amrita Shergill and Gogi Saroj Pal. Analyzing both artists individually it appears that on the basis of factors such as color, forms, composition and gestures the work differs; but considering the aspects of criticism for society, liberal spirit, impression of self-realization and identity, their works are similar to a certain extent.

So as on a concluding note it can be said that formal changes appeared in female figures being aligned with the contemporary state of women in society, contextual with political grounds and influenced by current artistic trends. It can also be stated that there have been two conflicting approaches in the formal representation of female figure, one is the portrayal of women as an element of beauty and sensuality and other is projecting her as a component of sexuality. The works and artists taken under consideration only serve as a medium to understand the formal

representation of a female body. There is no doubt that several examples remain untouched. However, the selected examples potentially solved for the intended discussion.

### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

None.

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