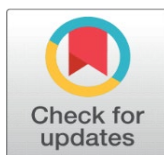
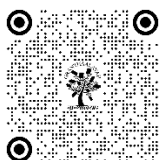


SOCIAL METAPHORS IN THE INSTALLATION ART OF CONTEMPORARY INDIAN WOMEN ARTISTS

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ABSTRACT

Art can be manifested and interpreted by artists to express and transcend changes in their surroundings, as well as showcases tragedies. Art can be used as one of the parameters which broaden our insight towards society. Artists examine social atrocities such as dysfunctional systems, criminal injustices, curbs on the freedom of expression, and childhood traumas which may be embedded in the artists' minds. Art is the mirror of society and both modernists and post-modernists have tended to demonstrate communal riots and political unrest at the time of global distress. Meanwhile, in the contemporary art world, art is represented with bleak and abject constructions of contemporary subjectivity where, artists basically tend to depict themes such as political issues and reforms, ecological evils, and narratives with social concern. Contemporary paradigms explore new directions to reconnect and be the definition of society in different modes of art. In this study, art and artists will be explored who have contributed to society in profound ways. Their installations will determine the social metaphors evoked and how they unveil the provocative binary of community, how their art has broken stereotypes and became the benefactors of community. This study will also reveal the significance of art in society, in the nation and in the market with visual inputs. In the contemporary domain, art can be shown as personal experiences or with universal themes such as war and migration, which is unfortunately still exists with people suffering irreplaceable scars. This study highlights leading women artists who are critically involved with their societies.

Keywords: Artist, Society, Politics, Contemporary Art, Installation Art

1. INTRODUCTION

Art has served many religious, political, and social functions, both to maintain structures and to bring changes right from prehistoric to contemporary society. During this transition period, the status of art as objects depicted through assemblage or installation, using found materials and having conceptually coded signs, was beginning to be unveiled. The present study broadens the spectrum of possibilities of art and artists being productive components of society. Artists highlight social atrocities with psychical and physical interpretations of these atrocities as subjects of their art. The installations of Shilpa Gupta, Sheela Gowda,

Nalini Malani, Shweta Bhattad are discussed in this paper along with other female artists. The vitality of social influence, politics, universal subjects, human interaction in urban and rural environments is visualized by the video installation of Malani, participatory project installations by Shilpa Gupta and Shweta Bhattad, and Sheela Gowda's craft skills or manual labor installation. This study employs women artists broadening the contemporary art spectrum by being creative influencers of upcoming artists.

In order for society to function, it must establish its entire culture or way of life, as well as its defenses, infrastructure, society and political structures, etc. Since it doesn't matter all that much in the vast scheme of things and because it increasingly serves as a distraction and safety valve for what little individualism there is, art in the world continues to be an area of apparent freedom. People other than philosophers assume art as luxury, a mere spectacle, like a private jet if one can afford it, diminishing its value in the society. A tribe or a city cannot survive without art in a larger, more complex society. Throughout history, social unrest and inequality have prompted the creation of art. It can also act as a preliminary step for difficult discussions about injustice and solidarity [Krautheimer \(1938\)](#). In present scenario, contemporary art has been the mirror of the society on the global level. It encompasses all the genres of visual art, be it video installation, performances, painting, sculpture, graphic arts, etc. This study includes leading women artists addressing social issues through their much talked about works. Revisiting past experiences, gathering social feedback of polity in the country, addressing injustice, freedom, and migration with a touch of mythology and tradition, explicitly depicted through new media and technology- these approaches to their work are explored.

Society needs a self-image if it is to survive. Without a consistent identity, it will disintegrate; its image is what gives it its identity. Although creating one's identity through one's ancestry is important, maintaining one's image is even more crucial for preserving society's institutional and moral code [Barrett \(1990\)](#). The identity of artists in society is also crucial for people to understand good and evil within society. The identification of any society is based on historical events and its effects which still exist in the present- this defines who we are right now. The women artists discussed are expressing a glimpse of society through their works. Moreover, there are numerous ways to depict social metaphors, by being present and observing our surroundings. These components play a greater role in understanding societal environs. Artists interplay their own emotions and those of society into their oeuvre, through self-expression or experiences. Self-expression must be learned through our own life experiences. Art has to leave all the foundations of the past, which employ old educational teachings in the institution, as they lead to incompetency in a modern art society. Each sect of society examines art if it evokes a sense of traditionalism or modernity, or environmental awareness. An artist should engage with society through physical and cultural aspects of environments, including the human environment and technology, as well as physical aspects like the landscape, climate, people, flora, and animals; and cultural aspects such as ways of living and language. The social and cultural foundations of any nation were significantly altered by the Industrial Revolution and the New Education, which also had an impact on the status of the artist in society and his means of interaction with others.

Indian artists' attempts were to understand their sociocultural context at the beginning of the 20th century, and they were aware of their circumstances. The ruins of the artisanal legacy stood in the way of individual artists who lacked funding or devoted patronage. They were anticipating a new beginning that would diverge from the conventional narrative framework and the colonial pause that nearly

reversed the form of historical art. The framework of the older art was linguistic; it combined conventional terminology with the artists' enhanced sensibility as a result of contact with their environment. In the beginning of the 20th century, artists aimed to use western realism and tools with picturesque visual facts of their surroundings, but most of their decisions and perspectives were more cloned and unoriginal [Subramanyan \(2006\)](#). The aforementioned context demonstrates how important art is and how it has served as a window into society throughout time and into the present. The above context gathers all the proofs of how vital art is and how art has been the mirror of society through ages till today.

2. CONTEXT OF INSTALLATION ART IN INDIA

2.1. INSTALLATION ART

Artist Daniel Buren recognized the concept of 'installation' in 1971, in the essay 'The Function of the Studio'. Installation art could be tentatively defined as a genre of three-dimensional works where, artists install objects in a well-defined space either inside, outside or around an exhibition space. The nature of installation art can vary from abstract, pictorial representations to controlled or spontaneous form. It also involves a wide range of artistic practices which often overlaps with inter-related areas such as, minimalism, conceptual art, video art, earth art, and temporality and ephemerality. Separate objects can either be included or not at all. There has been always an inverse association observed between the spectator and the work, the work and space, the space, and the spectator. Spectator participation experience could be seen in Shilpa Gupta and Shweta Bhattad's installations. Where they directly interact with their immediate surroundings and ultimately gather their feedback regarding what artists and people experienced along the way. These works will be briefly explored below. The technical mode of installation popularly known as Video installation introduced by the prominent artist Nalini Malani paved the way for the new revolution of art in India. [Julie \(1999\)](#)

2.2. SOCIO-CULTURAL MATRIX IN INSTALLATION ART

India is a secular nation, comprising myriad traditions and rituals. This highlights the importance of intellectuals in defining the characteristics of Indian secular culture. Additionally, this fact also highlights the relevance of mythology in modern society and the connection between cultural icons and secular politics. It raises the issue of what will become of modern art in the emerging orthodoxies. The nation's turbulent and disruptive colonialism, post-colonialism, and partition continue to be key topics for modern Indian artists [Subramanyan \(2006\)](#). Modern and contemporary artists address a wide array of subject matter ranging from nation and border disputes, secularism, gender, and religion related politics to general geo-political affairs. Contemporary artists bring forward the most dynamic and universal themes into the broader perspective but some of them are also depicting crucial subjects of society. Artists engage themselves with issues concerning the impact of politics on common people. Artists from the early 20th century had tried to depict pre-independent India, and during and post-independent India, highlighting country's social unrest and identity. Moving on to the Bengal School- it paved the way for Indian artists to discover their identity in the midst of the National movement in the early 20th century, and originated in erstwhile Calcutta and Santiniketan. The artists of the Bengal School opposed the academic art approach imposed by the British authorities. Abanindranath Tagore with his 'Bharat Mata' propagated the feeling of nationalism among the masses of

India. Nandalal Bose, Somnath Hore, Chittaprosad Bhattacharya, M. F. Hussain, Satish Gujral and Tyeb Mehta were among the few artists who worked profoundly on the social atrocities prevailing at the time. If we talk about the contemporary scenario, artists such as Vivan Sundaram, Nalani Malani, Shilpa Gupta, Sheela Gowda, Jitish Kallat, Reena Saini Kallat, Shweta Bhattad and Veer Munshi are some of the artists working closely with societal issues. In this paper, we have discussed notable women artists and how they have thoroughly examined the social metaphor of society, and how these metaphors get communicated through some of their most well-known installations, serving as a language to address both nuclear and engraved social issues. With above-mentioned reasons, there are some prominent women contemporary faces in the artworld who have contributed so much to society by working on a diverse range of mediums and social themes. These women artists have created a new binary for the Indian art world, and their continuous urge to meddle with the societal and political arena has found another genre altogether. They are putting forward the amalgamation of culture and mythology mixed with technology, video installation, participatory projects, etc. The following leading female artists consider traditional and technical elements into their respective works. [Shubhalakshmi \(2015\)](#)

3. NALANI MALANI

Nalani Malani is an established multimedia artist, working with varied media-installations, video, film, performance. Her works resonate with social activism and deploys mainly political themes [Jhaveri \(2005\)](#). In Malani's video installation work-Medeaprojekt ([Figure 1](#)), she works with a new allegory for an ancient tale, investigating exploitation and violence as political categories. Through the Greek myth she tests the ground for an argument- in which what will happen if you go against nature [Turner \(2005\)](#). Malani in the 1990s continued to work on the Medea theme to explore social or political issues connecting it to present day society ([Chaitanya Sambrani; https://www.nalanimalani.com/texts/chaitanya2.htm](#)).

Medea material is a play which was veraciously presented as a text about colonialism and of the Barbarian Medea arriving in Corinth and who is tamed into being a woman [Rajadhyaksha \(1997\)](#).

Figure 1



Figure 1 Medea and the Ships (1995-96)

Source <https://www.nalanimalani.com/installations/Medea.htm>

It was a joint venture with actress Alaknanda Samarth on an interpretation of Heiner Mueller's Medea [Jhaveri \(2005\)](#). Another of Malani's video installation- 'Remembering Toba Tek Singh', is a short story by Sadat Hasan Manto, a Pakistani writer, about a person of an unknown village. This work revolves around the story of Bishen Singh as he refuses to choose between India and Pakistan in 1947, who later dies of fatigue and distress. The video installation which propagated on the mural she did for Chemould Gallery, Bombay in response to the ignorance and vandalism of 19th Century mural painting of Nathdwara, Rajasthan, was known as City of Desires [Rajadhyaksha \(1997\)](#)

Other female artists also working with different media, be it video photography, performance or installation are Pushpmala N. and Rummana Hussain. Pushpmala's work, is titled the Phantom Lady or kismet (1996-98). In Rumanna Hussain's installation Home/ Nation (1996), she worked through a set of displacements whether nothing adds up, neither the subjects nor the end [Turner \(2005\)](#).

Figure 2



Figure 2 The Nymph and Adult, 2001

Source https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hema_Upadhyay_the_nymph_and_adult.jpg

Artist Hema Upadhyay, for her installation titled "The Nymph and the Adult" sculpted and infested the gallery space by nearly 2000 lifelike cockroaches in 2001 ([Figure 2](#)). This installation displayed politically and militarily tense times in the South Asian Subcontinent. It also raised the question of whether cockroaches would be the only survivors on earth (<https://www.saffronart.com/artists/hema-upadhyay>). Her work is characterized by deep emotional sensitivities to the realities of poverty and displacement. Her effortless linking of personal trauma with environmental and human crises is evocative.

4. SHEELA GOWDA

Gowda is a well-known contemporary artist whose work spans a variety of media including sculpture, installation, painting, and drawing. Her work often engages with social and political issues, exploring themes such as labor, gender and migration. Gowda implements craft skills by hand, in order to address the conditions of manual labor in the face of India's social and economic transformation, as well as

its role in the creation of art. She frequently draws inspiration from impoverished and disenfranchised groups of India to produce astounding pieces like *Behold* (2009) (Figure 3). The piece is made up of 20 automobile bumpers strung by tight plaits of human hair from four kilometers of knotted rope. It reacts to the conflict between India's ferocious urban aspirations and the religious economy, where hair is donated to temples to make talismans, or then sold for profit ('Behold', Sheela Gowda, 2009 | Tate).

Figure 3



Figure 3 *Behold*, 2009, Sheela Gowda

Source <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/gowda-behold-t14118>

Figure 4



Figure 4 *Of all People*, 2011

Source moma.org/collection/works/282419

Gowda also used salvaged architectural elements, such as doorjambs, window frames, and a wooden table, to build the scene for *Of All People* (Figure 4), gathered from Bangalore homes that had been demolished due to modernization. She painted these parts in vivid yellows, pinks, and turquoise hues, typical of the homes there, to fill her scene with hundreds of little wooden votive figures that are used in many communal social ceremonies. Formerly painstakingly hand-carved, these

sculptures are now quickly and inexpensively created by artists who carve three tiny indentations into wood to represent a face. Gowda photographed several of these people high up on the wall, where a portrait of an elderly person or an image of a deity may hang in an Indian home. Gowda's theatrical settings and the phantom bodies that fill them all allude to the hierarchical power systems that define how people must live inside structures, whether they be social, economic, or political (moma.org/collection/works/282419).

5. SHILPA GUPTA

Shilpa Gupta is a critically acclaimed international artist, working in varied visual forms. Her art projects expand new-media art, trans-disciplinary collaboration, interactive performances, and installation. Gupta is interested in how people perceive things, particularly the invisible, and how knowledge is produced, consumed, and organized into arbitrary categories and systems. She uses video, performance, sound, and installation to employ knowledge and encourage information flows across time and communities. Moving on to one of her celebrated pieces displayed at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, 2018-2019 and the 58th Venice Biennale, 2019 respectively, titled *For, In Your Mouth, I Cannot Fit* (2017–18) (Figure 5), it was a participatory installation which deploys the verses of 100 poets who were imprisoned for expressing their political views (<https://www.gallerychemould.com/artists>). Another of her much anticipated interactive installations, *There is No Explosive Here*, 2007 (Figure 6), she left a message for the audience to be the part of this project which stated- “You are personally invited to participate in this interactive project by choosing any bag from here and taking it for a walk in a public space- sit in a café, stand by a bus stop, or travel the tube?” Adajania (2010). Women artists in 1900s had tried to liberate themselves from traditional modes of working with two-dimensional frames to video art, performance art and installation art.

Figure 5



Figure 5 *For, in Your Tongue, I Cannot Fit*, 2017-18, Sound Installations with 100 Speakers' Microphones, Printed Text and Metal Stands

Source <https://www.gallerychemould.com/artists/53-shilpa-gupta/works/3051-shilpa-gupta-for-in-your-tongue-i-cannot-fit-2017-2018/>

Figure 6



Figure 6 There is No Explosive in This, 2007, Interactive Installation and photographs.

Source <https://www.gallerychemould.com/artists/53-shilpa-gupta/works/3123-shilpa-gupta-there-is-no-explosive-in-this-2007/>

6. REENA SAINI KALLAT

Reena Saini Kallat is an international artist practicing new media art, video installations, photography, and sculpture. Kallat has a keen interest in social borders and polity, and she has also tried to employ various issues pertaining to national and international political unrest like continuing aftershocks of the partition in India, in which her family suffered. In one of her well-known video works titled 'Blind Spots' (Figure 7), Kallat uses Snellen charts to represent the exposition of the constitutions of thirteen pairs of nations at war across the globe (<https://reenakallat.com/works/blind-spots-2017-2019/>). The interview with Platform magazine quotes Reena- "...in this video installation 'Blind Spots' where I'm exploring the space of the missing fragment, omission of data or no cognition" (<https://www.platform-mag.com/art/blind-spots.html>). Kallat has conducted a profound study on a number of migration histories, the exploitation of common natural resources, and archives of disappeared people.

Figure 7



Figure 7 Blind Spots, 2017-19, Thirteen Channel Video Installation, Monitors, Sculptural Sound Devices with Audio

Source <https://reenakallat.com/works/blind-spots-2017-2019/>

7. SHWETA BHATTAD

Bhattad is primarily a performance and installation artist who focuses on themes related to farmers, girls' safety, and education. Her most well-known works were the community-based "Farmer's Haat" and "the Gram Art Project," in which she wore all white and sat on an open coffin for three hours while reciting "Vishwas," which represented farmers' suffering and exploitation in India. Bhattad's collaboration with Khoj Foundation leads to one of her proficient works "Hamara Jamun Bagh". It was the part of the 'I Have a Dream Project' where artists, farmers, and children came together from the Paradsinga village along with local Khirkae residents, through different community art projects. The project was a vital step in connecting the youth with food, soil, and farming. This particular work resonates with spectator participation, and a combination of installation and performance art. Bhattad is also a founder member of The Gram Art Project (Figure 8), which is a group of farmers, artists, women, craftsmen (<https://khojstudios.org/blog/hamara-jamun-bagh/>). She paid attention to the issues of declining farmland and translated her concern into actions by pushing farmer communities and their distinct practices to the forefront. She achieved this vision by inviting artists to collaborate with farmers by sowing seeds and cultivating gardens in the shape of "I have a dream" in their own language (<https://www.shethepeople.tv/news/indias-women-artists-shweta-bhattad/>).

Figure 8



Figure 8 Farmers Hat, Interactive Installation, Shweta Bhattad

Source <https://www.caleidoscope.in/volunteering/shweta-bhattad>

Another creative initiative taken by Bhattad and Khoj studios' In Context: Public. Art. Ecology- known as Art and Food in 2012 (Figure 9), was a six week residential project which mainly dealt with ecological issues surrounding food. The project incorporated artistic medium such as performance and installations, and interactive dialogues with society. This project was initiated to explore the broader public domain basically around Delhi.

Figure 9



Figure 9 Art and Food, Interactive Installation

Source <https://khojstudios.org/programme/art-and-food/edition-2012/>

8. CONCLUSION

Indian women installation artists have made significant contributions to the contemporary art scene in India and around the world. These artists have used various mediums and techniques to create installations that explore a wide range of social, cultural, and political issues. Their work often challenges traditional gender roles, explores themes related to identity, and critiques patriarchal structures of society. Many of these artists have also addressed issues related to environmental degradation, globalization, and consumerism. They have identified specific aspects of society, and questioned prevailing social evils. To know what a society identifies with is essential, and analysing works of these women artists has enabled this. They have successfully acknowledged hidden social anomalies mostly overlooked by other people.

The impact on global art by these women artists is phenomenal. They have gathered their experiences and taken their art to new heights. A critical analysis of geopolitical agendas and social activism is presented through their video installations and interactive sessions with their immediate surroundings, and their gathering of feedback regarding how their art has created an impact and spectators' participation. Their work has given a whole new dimension to the contemporary art world. Overall, women artists have contributed to the diversification and enrichment of contemporary art practices in India and beyond. Their works continue to inspire and provoke audiences to question and engage with pressing social and political issues of our time.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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