



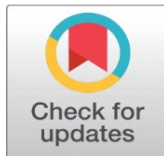
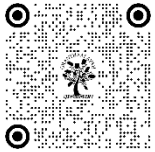


CONTEMPORARY INDIAN WOMEN ARTISTS AS DIGITAL SOCIAL COMMENTATORS ON WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been a rapid increase in the number of Indian women artists harnessing digital platforms to critique and engage with societal norms surrounding gender equality and women's empowerment. Being active participants on digital platforms they are strongly addressing issues related to women's rights by socially commentating through their art. Digital platforms encourage global audiences and international access to artworks that enable artists to amplify their content through active social media engagement. Social media platforms are powerful mediums of connection that encourage the boosting of young talent to reach diverse audiences through their exhilarating art pieces. These women artists are presenting themselves and letting out their voice through art campaigns, projects, series, installations, 3D artworks, crypto, digital paintings, etc. to bring to the forefront topics such as gender bias, patriarchy, violence against females, stereotyping, inclusivity, sexuality, consent, body shaming, feminine perfection, female beauty standards and so on. They are motivated to present to the women of India, the need to be aware of the challenges and threats imposed on their identity as the society in which they live is at the turn of acknowledging a new age that is ready to offer acceptance and equality to women on the terms of their fight and struggle of pushing the system forward from the dead asleep. The digital artworks of a senior contemporary women artist and a young digital social commentator will be discussed in the paper to present a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the socio-political issues addressed through the artistic journey of these two artists belonging to different age groups.

Keywords: Digital Art, Stereotyping, Patriarchy, Women Empowerment, Contemporary Indian Women Artists

1. INTRODUCTION

The paper explores the role of contemporary Indian women artists as digital commentators on women's empowerment through their artwork. Exploring a diverse range of mediums, the women artists today are portraying through their artworks, exhibited in contemporary art exhibitions, the opportunities and threats imposed on women's identity. The contributions made by the statehood of women in the country towards the development of society represent their identity and express various facets of womanhood.

The art of Indian female artists often reflects the complexity of being a woman in India, navigating multiple layers of identity and societal expectations. These female artists are becoming active digital commentators as they are adopting digital techniques as a medium for creating and exhibiting art. The popularity and accessibility of digital art are due to the advancements in technology and the widespread availability of digital tools and platforms. The opportunity to reach a global audience is shared and distributed online through websites, social media, virtual exhibitions, and digital galleries. The contemporary work of Indian women artists exhibits a creative approach that challenges injustice and inequality imposed on their communal identity through drawbacks such as gender stereotyping, patriarchy, and restrictions on women's inclusivity.

They also promote women's empowerment by voicing their artworks through webinars, talks, and active participation on social media platforms. Art is the voice that opens a platform for communication for all be it the bold, oppressive, or the one who is yet to come to the forefront. As social commentators, they at times attack the social and political failings through their art to incite public participation on riveting concerns of societal development. Women are increasingly becoming digitally independent in addressing societal issues related to their community, thereby enhancing their status.

Social media artist Samyukta Madhu Aka celebrates the empowerment of women by depicting the modern Indian woman in her intimidating form of being bold, free, confident, independent, and well aware of the challenges presiding amidst. She often represents women labeled as tabooed in India thus, defying society's projections of the idolized feminine beauty. In her series of works, "Breaking the glass ceiling" she addresses the need for the modern woman to fight for herself against all odds imposed on her by the system that she continues to confront not with mere survival but rather victory. On the other hand, senior artist Pushp Mala N's artwork is an exuberant reflection of her commitment to women's empowerment as it is a poignant reminder of the ongoing struggle for gender equality and the triumphs made by women in the face of adversity.

2. METHOD AND MATERIAL

This paper is based on a qualitative analysis highlighting the social perspective of women's identity reflecting their struggle and achievement. Integral to this paper is a study of two distinguished contemporary women artists expressing themselves digitally through issues concerning the upliftment of women in the current society. The limitation of this research exists in the selection of artists and their artworks. The study aims to include female artists from various age groups to achieve a comprehensive examination. However, due to constraints related to the length of the paper, there were limitations in selecting the artists to be included in the study. The limitation impacts the overall outcome by creating a representation bias, as artworks that specifically project discrimination based on gender were selected.

3. DISCUSSION

An overview of contemporary Indian art, by one of the leading auction houses of Indian fine arts, Saffron Art, calls it "receptive to growth and change" [Overview of Indian Ancient & Contemporary Art - Saffronart.com. \(n.d.\)](#). Indian contemporary artists are increasingly responding to the rapid progression of globalization by obscuring the rigid boundaries that define art, videography, photography, design, and installation. Through their vivid mannerisms of self-expression and socio-

political commentary, they promote introspection and global awareness of subjects concerning universal growth. Women have collaborated to form art movements and groups to support their identity in the predominantly male society. The social system of our country evidently states that the functioning of it is patriarchal, thus, women artists are actively engaging themselves in revolutionizing the prevailing conditions of confinement and hardship echoing the sound of their inner voice of freedom. These artists have promoted and explored authority by inhabiting positions with multiple identities that have also enabled them to interrogate subjects related to the corruption of power. In the decade of 1980, Nalini Malani urged to break the male domination in exhibiting artworks. Gayatri Sinha in her article '*Making a Subject Space*' published in the art magazine, *Art India* states, Nalini Malani, an active and leading contemporary women artist was aware of the male dominion in the Indian art field back in 1987 and expressed interest in breaking away from it by writing of exhibiting a women art show to her contemporary, [Sinha \(2016\)](#), p.28. Later that year a group of four dynamic women artists set to start one of India's most persuasively clear artists formations, comprising Nalini Malani, Arpita Singh, Madhavi Parekh, and Nilima Sheikh.

The contemporary outlook of Indian art exhibits young and senior women artists rigorously working hard by emerging themselves in subjects concerning their identity. It has been for a very long time in our country where women have been assigned to only certain areas of society's functioning, restricting their abilities. Speaking of the portrayal of women as a subject in artworks or advertisements etc., she has largely been related to eroticism or the male gaze. With the new digital age, times are changing and women themselves are rising above such mental mediocracy creating art history with new media as digital art, installations, video projection performances, etc., and new subjects such as gender stereotyping, body shaming, sensitivity, etc. The portrayal of such subjects suggests the follies and irrationalities of society concerning the community of women in the hope of improvement. There are certain situations and circumstances which surround the artist and are unavoidable thus, striking her conscience to let out her voice speaking through paint. The conflicts addressed in the paintings of these contemporary women artists portray the subject in a voice that is addressed as a whole. These artworks are often pensive expressing pain and agony that is an outcome of several years of either self-experienced suppression or perceiving the petulant conditions of women in the society. Artists are working with sincerity and dedication in order to promise a better future for their community. Issues concerning women are a subject not new to the field of art. There have been several artists of prominence whose work claims global interests and rewards. According to Turner and Webb, "Art is an important element in any world-making agenda because it has always been a means to imagine other possibilities" [Turner & Webb \(2016\)](#), p.146. These women artists have been striving through decades to build their strong identity positions, where they have been in a continuous exploration of finding different ways of justice. In their artworks, contemporary Indian women artists are portraying subjects like corruption of power, denial of authority to women, and their freedom of expression.

Visualizing the scene of contemporary art in India, Prachi Priyanka rightly states in her paper, '*Quest for Selfhood: Women Artists in the South Asian Visual Arts*', about contemporary Indian women artists leading the forefront of innovative creativity in art fields promoting gender equity, giving birth to women of a New Age who do not seek validation for the fiercely independent roles they play as makers of a new culture [Priyanka \(2021\)](#), p.68.

Samyukta Madhu Aka, a young contemporary Indian artist was born and raised in Chennai and later moved to New York. She has a large following on social media sites such as Instagram, addresses her thoughts through the digital portrayal of the reality of statehood of women in India. Her work states the conflict between the idol worship of the female as Goddess in contrast to the actual treatment they are given in Indian society. The artist believes that "The single brown woman is at a new age of acceptance and equality, and has to fight for herself even though people will tell her what she can't or shouldn't do" [Sukumar \(2017\)](#). The color pink is predominant in her work which she associates with the spirit of the female and the color apt for her generation. Central to the subject of her art is the brown woman who treads her path irrespective of the taboos and boundaries of society. One of her series 'Kali' has gained much popularity on social sites. Her art style is unique with bold symbolic meanings that have a surreal sense about them, making it communicative with the ability to gain mass popularity in such a short time. Vogue India acknowledges Sam Madhu as the young artist who is upfront with uploading unapologetic images of artworks concerning urban living and the thought process of its people, receiving peace of mind on social media [Nast \(2019\)](#). She strikes these mentalities by posting art on social media, in which the most evocative of her works is the series of the Indian Goddess 'Kali', symbolizing the stature of divinity given to Indian Goddesses as females contrary to which they face the actuality of struggle and hardship at every step.

Represents Goddess Kali in an Adidas sweatshirt holding a demon mask by its hair. The pink of the sweatshirt symbolizes feminism which the artist so strongly addresses throughout her works. The work was uploaded on the social networking site, Instagram and it caused an uproar fetching several dislikes for how goddess Kali's image was represented. The images portrayed in her work are often controversial with bold expressions of lines and vibrancy in color.

The second artist I study as a digital commentator on social issues concerning women is the senior contemporary artist, Pushpmala N. who was born in Bangalore and is currently based over there. With formal training in sculpture, she shifted her interest to photography to explore the field further. Pushpmala N. is brilliantly exploring the field of digital art along with her video projections speaking of female identity in India. She is widely acknowledged for her experiment in the field of photography, a performance where she is the actor of her thoughts, often also performing live and in video projections. Her several art series of photography as a medium depict Indian Goddesses performing different roles that contradict the portrayal of her identity as a Goddess. In her digital photographs, she combines her artwork with that of other legendary artists such as Abanindranath Tagore and Raja Ravi Verma. She presents herself in costumes of different Indian Goddesses with similar body language as portrayed in the art of those great masters' example, "Kichaka-Sairandhari" by Raja Ravi Varma & "Bharatmata" by Abanindranath Tagore. Several of her photographs represent art that interrogates the aspects of gender stereotyping, while she involves herself in the mood of the pictures represented. Her art photographs are a result of art created through the graphic design of photomontage. The interesting part of her work is that she has cast herself in several different roles which are the main subject of her artworks. Projects of photography and video installations have gained her international reputation, in which through the use of popular media and film she involves her body to satirize and comment on a wide range of subjects [Sinha \(2011\)](#).

Figure 1



Figure 1 Phantom Lady or Kismet (1996-1998)

Source (Phantom Lady or Kismet (1996-1998) - [Pushpamala \(n.d.\)](#))

Figure 2



Figure 2 Return of the Phantom Lady (2012) Sinful City

Source (The Return of the Phantom Lady (Sinful City) (2012) a Photo-romance - [Pushpamala \(n.d.\)](#))

One of the early photographic series by Pushpamala N. was her photo romance titled Phantom Lady or Kismet (1996-1998) comprising 25 black and white prints. The artist played the role of two protagonists in this series, of the Phantom Lady masked in a character similar to that of the Western superhero Zorro, embarked upon a rescue mission to release her twin sister from the trap of the underworld gangster community. Style of the series is set in a narrative format of the early “stunt pictures of Wadia Movietone, featuring Fearless Nadia – the Hunterwali” [Pushpamala \(n.d.\)](#). Phantom Lady or Kismet, 1996-98 the Phantom Lady series is an example of one of the earliest conceptual based photography works in India that brilliantly incorporates performance based on satiric commentary to interrogate the clutches of stereotyping in India.

Several years later in 2012, the artist returned to the concept of Phantom Lady, portraying a dark contemporary picture of Mumbai as the “Sinful City” of murders,

foul play, and intrigue through a set of 21 colored photographs [Mash. \(2021\)](#). Through this commissioned digital series, she does social commentary on the contemporary subjects of society. She involves herself in this work by performing the role of the heroine in rescuing an orphan schoolgirl. Her works largely enact the transformation of stereotyping of women, a subject concerning societal development. As a skilled performer she performs the lead role in all spheres, be it a victim, a savior, or evil. Her portrayal of subjects related to sensitive issues concerning the progress of women is depicted through her art in representing several iconic female personalities [Indian Feminism Today: An Exploration Through the Lives and Works of these 6 Artists – Art Fervour. \(n.d.\)](#). The artist has earned recognition and a reputation in the field of photographic art in which she explores the role played by women in different fields in Indian Society. She merges herself at physical and mental levels with the art that she creates to understand and reveal the experiences of different people [Neef \(2020\)](#).

Amongst other women artists incorporating the subjects concerning women's identity in India are Nalini Malini, Navjot Altaf, Arpita Singh, Nilima Sheikh, Anita Dube, Sheba Chhachhi, etc. Women have mostly been associated with reproduction without being accepted for the changes that come naturally with it. The aging women, post-pregnancy stretch marks, skin color, etc. are scenes that are not to be portrayed as beautiful but rather unsightly. Artist such as Sheba Chhachhi gives a critical analysis of a woman's relationship with her body that signifies the female body celebrating its sensuality [Menezes \(2016\)](#). The incorporation of the female body as a subject in the works of art is transforming radically, discarding the old conventions of portrayal, and exploring new mediums with expressive content. Kamayani Sharma discusses the intervention of the body and its uses, "The importance of the body especially the female body as a site of subversion and reinterpretation of history became apparent, and young artists embraced this development as they probed the possibilities of artistic performance to challenge the norms that pertained to the enactment of gender and sensuality" [Sharma \(2016\)](#). Women artists all across India are expressing themselves through art creating a visual culture of removing conventional boundaries concerning female identity.

4. CONCLUSION

Viewing subjects concerning women's identity in India is creating a stir to project freedom that concerns fields like education, speech, expression, empowerment, modernism, independence, etc. Senior contemporary women artists of India have been raising their concerns in these subjects before the millennium which has resulted in a unified approach in targeting the much-needed expression of concern. Today is the time when technology is spreading its light to every little small corner that has been in the darkness of either ignorance or rejection. The wave of digital is further strengthening the core of such campaigns, not just bringing like-minded people closer but helping the message spread at a much faster rate with a reward of massive global fan following that has a very important role to play in the process of transformation. The women who are still struggling with the dilemma and fear of standing up for themselves can experience tremendous support from this wave of letting one's voice be heard whether through painting, animation, music, theater, photography, literature, etc. Digital artworks created by artists such as Samyukta Madhu Aka and Pushpmala N. fear no boundaries of expression and are attempts to move the audience in the call of women reframing their identity and constructing empowerment.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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