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## Women's Subjectivity in Mithila Painting

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### ABSTRACT

*In this study, the researcher examines Rani Jha's artistic narratives through the lens of women's subjectivity. Jha's depiction of femininity challenges the dominant patriarchal norms. The study explores the symbolism present in Jha's work, shedding light on the descriptive and normative aspects of her artistic practice. The research also addresses the themes of oppression, violence, and trauma experienced by women. The examination of these issues aims to highlight the inequalities and barriers that hinder a harmonious coexistence between men and women, despite both genders being vital creative forces essential for the continuity of the human race. Furthermore, painting plays a significant role in preserving cultural heritage and serves as a platform for women to express their concerns about equality and freedom of movement. Through their artwork, women can convey their lifestyle, societal values, behavioral norms, and everyday experiences.*

**Keywords:** Subjectivity, Descriptive and Normative Views, Painting, Painterly Epistemology, Visual Semiotics

### INTRODUCTION

The research paper explores the motives behind Rani Jha's selected paintings, focusing on Maithili women in a border region between Nepal and India. Like in other areas, Maithili women utilize painting as a means to shape and navigate the principles, values, behaviors, norms, and daily practices of Maithili societies. These cultural works of art appear to be influenced by Hindu perspectives on the self, society, and the sacred. Through painting, important aspects such as agency, visual representation, subjectivity, and others are constructed. Moreover, paintings serve as a medium to express the cultural constraints on women's

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mobility, speech, and marginalization. The process of creating meaning is also intricately linked to painting. Consequently, painting has become a genre of expression for Maithili women. With the increasing opportunities for mobility and education, traditional norms that confine women to limited roles are being questioned. Painting, therefore, becomes a collective experience that allegorically reflects the realities of society. Painting creates a sense of free morality and a sense of change. Maithili people's lives were affected by civil conflict and ethnic identity Politics as well as the touch in global communication and consumerism, such shifts affects women's perspective and expressive practices. When preoccupied with some questions such as: Who are the audience of a painter? What psychological motives do the painters have in their paintings? One can speculate on various themes. The concerns are of varying degrees. In this line of thoughts, the paintings have the implicit meanings and they can be deciphered with the concerted efforts. The paintings cannot be void of the meanings.

### **Painting as Palimpsest**

Painting is a long-standing part of maintaining heritage. It provides an opportunity for women to express the questions of mobility, the meaning of family and the degree to which the tender of their lives is fated as Buddhist Tantric Philosophy. In the Mithila region of Nepal, painting is an age revered tradition. This article provides a full-fledged exposure to Mithila painting from the perspective of visual social semiotics. Tantric Philosophy reversed women Parvati is known as the cosmic mother. Shiva is a cosmic father, male and female are fundamental to each other. Every female has a masculine element and every male has a feminine element. This androgynous manifestation of Shiva and Parvati highlights the union and importance of female and male. Balancing of two energies can enable him or her to live a life of fulfillment.

So, the existence of males and females is necessary for a happy life. We shouldn't be one-sided, preferring male children only; there should be a balance in the population in terms of male and female.

Traditional notions of Mithila view women in the form of Gauri. Gauri represents a civilizational and patriarchal domesticated cosmic mother. For lineage, purity Mithila society tries to keep women under control. Man's interior nature, is feminine, woman's interior nature is masculine. The magnetic and electric emanations of men and women are inverse to each other, like the positive and negative poles of a magnet.

Kali form is another aspect to compare women; Kali's figure is terrifying having blood-red lolling tongue. She is the symbol of the active cosmic power of both creation and destruction. Kali is wild and untamed. Kali means focus on enjoyment and ecstasy. Pond in Khobar is associated with Kali's cosmic womb. Pond gets associated with the feminine principle of fertility.

In Gauri, there is no agency of female but in Kali there is female agency. Gauri construction of Kali in painting is patriarchal construction. In patriarchy wife is expected to have two qualities first she should be devoted to husband. That means the infidelity of woman is considered unethical..

Hindu religion has one uncuttable saying "female is the measure of creature. Prakriti (Kali) is feminine and "purus" is male. Woman doesn't seem to have a choice but man has choice. In Shivapurana agency is given to egg. The Shiva line of Hinduism is known as nondualism. It is related to the concept like mukti can be gained through materiality. In Adait marga, mukti cannot be gained through materiality. Subjective lies in male in Adait philosophy but in Shaivism subjectivity lies in female.

Like other Hindu women Mithili women also live under patriarchy. Mithila society despite agency in ritual practices. The women empowerment movement is within the Hindu culture, despite being patriarchal. Female agency is dominant in Krishna Lila also Krishna feels incomplete without female therefore he keeps Mayur Pomp on head. So, the real identity is female, female subjectivity is dominant. Thus, creative energy is both male and female so we should respect both male and female to delegate time Mithila painting is the reflection of Adait Philosophy. Today's Mithili women need child but they aren't like baby producing machine.

#### **Literature Review: Mithila Painting as the Marked Voice of Women**

The study into the drives of the women's painting exposes an area to understand why Rani Jha would have been involved in the painting. In addition, this section discusses the particular character of the species of art called painting and its relevance to women's expressions. As the distinctive form of art, the paintings have become the intimate modes of expression for the women.

What does Mithila region constitute, what drives women to paint, women's sphere, why women paint as Rani Jha, women's position in society, and Creative expression. As Hiroshi Ishii (1993) mentions: "Mithila (Mithila) is the name of a region bestraddling the northern part of the state of Bihar in India and southeastern Nepal; it is bordered on the south by the Ganges (Gahga), in the west by the Gandaki River, in the east by the Kosi River and in the north by the Churia (Siwalik) range of hills in southern Nepal" (3).

This geographic delimitation intends to depict the natural climate and the people's preoccupations with a particular mode of arts for the expression of the inner self. Examining the motives of the women's painting takes us to another picture of the reality. According to Carolyn Henning (1996), "For centuries the women have painted certain figures and designs on the walls of their mud homes for ceremonial occasions, particularly weddings and boys' sacred thread ceremonies" (719). The paintings by women are not the modern day means. They exist in the society for a longer period of time. When they can express their inner psyche in these forms of expressions, their psyche gets relieved.

Claire Burkert (2008) adds, “[i]t might also be interpreted as acceptable means of expression for a woman within her assigned sphere of ritual and worship” (7). Where the male painterly practices would have contained a different worldview, the lady painting contains the issues pertaining to the women. They have the space assigned to them and their painting has the special and typical character that is different from that of males.

In the words of Pallavi Payal(2016):

In particular, women face deeper discrimination due to the patriarchal system of society. In many cases, discrimination against women is embedded in subtle ways in society, and several superstitions and strong beliefs are attached to it. Many traditional rituals, therefore, perpetuate gender biases, discrimination, and even violence against women. (p.19)

Regarding the universal nature of human suffering and considering the suffering of females, one can deduce that the women’s case is typically different to that of males. It would not be an exaggeration or the counter-exaggeration to assert that the women in Mithila sphere have much suffering in comparison to the males. They are the victims of various many traditional beliefs that have turned their lives more miserable. According to Kabit Labh (2020), 'The art form has always been unique in its capability of incorporating social values and cultural existence along with decoration and creativity. It stands as the voice of rural women in a patriarchal society' (25). The painterly epistemology has been a powerful means for absorbing, documenting and in way resisting the forces prevalent in the society. One could ponder for a longer time about the purposes of art. Nonetheless, as Kabit Labh maintains, the purpose of the painting is to document the rural lives of the women. Taken together, the review of literature shows that the painterly epistemology registers the women’s cases from the rural location. Mapping this contour of the arts, the article has the ample space to examine the cases of Rani Jha. This research niche, in a way, the reading of the trend and confirming the earlier argument that the paintings contain the sufferings of women and they are forces for the resistance is done in the article. In this sense, the article does not claim to present a new piece of knowledge; however, it verifies the knowledge and makes the existing claim that the paintings as the form of art are the remarkable fields of examination for the social and visual semiotics.

### **Research Statement: Special Characterizations by Rani Jha’s Painterly Epistemology**

As I had to study a course entitled “ Visual Social Semiotics of Mithila Art” while pursuing M.Phil. in English, I was caught by Rani Jha’s Paintings that intensively incorporated the subject matters of women. Coming across the literature in Mithila paintings, I could frame some questions for this study: a) What exactly is it that Rani Jha depicts in her paintings? b) What are the central issues of Rani Jha’s

artistic representation? This mimesis dimension of artistic reflection of reality drove me to the sustained consideration of Rani Jha's paintings. The objective of this research paper is to unpack the intimate feelings of the paintings by Rani Jha. In this line of thought, Rani Jha is a painter and the painted. The problem can be stated more lucidly in the emic perspectives. How does an insider portray in the paintings?

### **Rani Jha's Painting**

Rani Jha a Mithila daughter was born into conservative Brahmin family. To be a girl is something to think about in the patriarchal Mithila society. Painting as another form of jewelry depicts the ingredients of the visual semiotics of the society. Rani Jha's lived experience in the Mithila culture has been reflected in the selected paintings. In particular, Rani Jha is an artist and the subject of the art. This emic perspective of depiction is appreciated by critics as it is considered to represent higher form of reality. The artistic reflection of reality and the oneness of the object and subject positions makes this analysis more plausible form of examination.

Her paintings carried women's theme and are inspiring. This lady becomes a prime inspirer because she doesn't carry any negative approach to protest society but takes perfect medium to speak with paintings. This mode of expression is very dear in the artistic representation reflection because it is a liberal mode and even attempts at being the accommodative mode. Rani Jha's feminist heuristics rigorously exposes the patriarchy. Not only that, the arrogation of the social control repudiates the status of patriarchy. This new methodology adopted by Rani Jha has caught even the scholarly attention and efforts. The things which she cannot persuade her society by other means is persuaded through painting. In her works, painting seems as a powerful instrument to change the society. Jha is essentially the first woman to work outside home. Silently with the help of painting she fought against tradition and earned her Ph.D. from Darbhanga University. Her commitment to art work come from what she saw and experienced in her society. Her main concern was to record the life story of females and the dreams that are actualized. In fact, Jha's paintings intend to reconfigure the established patriarchal arrogation repudiating its contingency. This attempt by Rani Jha could have been more validated provided the analysis had been carried out with a sense of cross analysis and comparative analysis. This line of inquiry presumes and assumes this dimension of limitation. Nonetheless, the methodological mode, inquiry and competence that Rani Jha incorporates in the forced unprecedented focus on the status of women is exemplary. Her argumentative edge through the visual social semiotics establishes how one can wage a silent revolution that in turn attempts to fetch what is dearly intended. This article endeavors to analyze three paintings by her in the best possible incisive manner: *Abortion Clinic*, *Husband Leaving for Work* and *Two Women*. The selection rationale of these paintings is twofold: a) The paintings that exclusively incorporate the ethos of Mithila women b) The

juxtaposition of males and females in the existing social order of Mithila cultural milieu.

### **Abortion Clinic: Forced Infanticide and Dark Side of Motherhood**

As the foregoing discussion maintains, this painting initiates the special destiny the women folks in the Mithila have to face. As the case of patriarchy has been the global issue, here is a painting that delineates the case of Mithila women. The question is concerned with the typical social and cultural case of the Mithila women. The painting below is utterly provocative and receives the eyes of the women activists. Why would a woman have to conduct the infanticide only because of the baby girl in the womb? This deep-rooted issue in Mithila particular and Nepali society in general perhaps requires a deeper response that fits the solution. Nonetheless, the inferiority rendered to the baby girl is beyond the human rights issue. A woman is used to condemn a woman. A girl is the enemy of a girl. This rhetorical difficulty is a pertinent issue that is highlighted by this painting.

**Figure 1**  
*Abortion Clinic*



*Source: <http://peterzirnis.com/post/58303202722/rani-jhafeminist-perspectives-in-mithila-art>.*

### **Abortion Clinic**

This painting is allegorical in a sense this contains danger faced by women even before they are born. Due to the expectation of society to have son especially (in-laws) women are forced to adopt abortion. This painting depicts the ripple effect of abortion and the oppression faced by women. There lies the hidden story of patriarchy behind this painting. This painting speaks loudly about the son-prefering culture in the Mithila region that has caused a deep problem for the

women. Presumably, the earlier shastras (scriptural texts) force women to have son for the ascendancy to the heaven. As it is believed that people having son can go to heaven after death, the society, thus, expects the sons than the daughters.

Rani Jha notes that the doctor is "more dangerous than a cobra". Abortion hurts women more than it benefits them. Painting works as a campaign for women's rights, to have equal rights within marriage. Abortion is a fundamental freedom but abortion in the name of son is the violation of rights of women. The variation in motif shows how artist are responding the variation in time. The difficulties faced by women can be characterized as the case of subaltern. The subaltern here connotes a person who has been marginalized by the societal practices. A lady is forced to abort only because the fetus is the girl. Had the fetus been a boy, the society would not have forced her to abort. This societal assumption and presumption forces a lady to be a victim and has to undergo the difficulties.

Today's Maithili female aren't baby producing machines in the name of Son. The key of marriage life isn't only children but sexual pleasure. The educated maithili women doesn't hold the same outlook like her mother and grandmother. The Maithili Painting before 1980s primarily focus is on sexual enjoyment. Sexual Pleasure is given importance in tantra. Tantra is a cult of ecstasy, focused on a vision of cosmic sexuality. The rootedness of Maithili Painting is religion. The religious view of Mithila is guided by Hindu as well.

### **Husband Leaving: Women Destined to have Heavy Burdens of Responsibility**

Similar to Abortion Clinic, this painting bears the influence of the economic burden of a family upon the women. As the women are expected to carry the household affairs alone in the family in the absence of their husbands, the trouble is doubled.

The economic activities in Mithila area are very scant. The question of survival becomes important when the resources for the living are scarce. This painting by Rani Jha hints at that reality. Here is a husband who is compelled to leave home because he has to earn the bread for the whole family. When the husband is migrating temporarily perhaps for months or years, it is the wife who has the burden of looking after the in-laws and the children alone. This difficulty of the separation that the Mithila women have to face is because of the economic difficulties. Since there are no sufficient employment opportunities and the agriculture is no reliable activity, the husbands must leave home for the income.

**Figure 2**

*Husband leaving for work*



Source:<http://peterzirniss.com/post/58303202722/rani-jhafeminist-perspectives-in-mithila-art>).

In the painting, the wife is bidding by to her husband and husband seems to be reciprocating her bidding. This painting is the reminder of the Nepali classic Muna Madan in which Muna wails the departure while Madan must have to leave home for the survival means. The condition of women is demonstrated by this painting as they need to carry on the whole burden of the family in the absence of the husband. This responsibility is cumbersome in that the wife has to stay at home with limited resources and waiting for her husband to come one day. Although this story by this painting seems very common in Nepali society these days, it is the women who deeply realize how difficult it is to look after the whole family single-handedly. Things are more difficult than expressed. Why would Rani Jha have this kind of painting has some answers such as SomaGhosh (2020) assesses:

The process of painting has given a medium of expression to the women. These women are natural artists and don't really follow any norms . . . The painting practice provides income and empowers women who also have a goal to empower others, which makes them aware of their rights and gives them the confidence to deal with other social issues. (65)

Soma Ghosh (2020) emphasizes the qualification of Mithila women painters and their needs to paint. Not necessarily, the women painters in Mithila possess higher affiliations to the academic qualifications. Rani Jha is an exception here who possesses a doctoral degree. And. Obviously, the need to painting is to gain the means for the survival.



### Two Women: An Ideal Life of Women and the Hope

Rani Jha's normative vision is presented by this representation. A lady has to be the best company of the other. While the patriarchal conspiracy contains the presumption that the women are the enemy of the women, this art goes against that presumption.

**Figure 3**

*Two women*



Source: <http://peterzirniss.com/post/58303202722/rani-jha-feminist-perspectives-in-mithila-art>).

### Two Women

Unlike *Abortion Clinic* and *Husband Leaving*, the two paintings analyzed in the foregoing, this painting embraces optimism, the sense of sisterhood among the women, when the lady is forced to abort and a lady is forced to carry the burden of family single-handedly, are the women not supported by any force? What is the supportive force to the women? Presumably, Rani Jha intends to demonstrate the solidarity among the ladies. In times of crisis, a person needs someone to fall back on, this painting relies on that conception of the support. There are two ladies depicted in the painting, a lady has a girl on her lap and other is talking to her. This painting must be what Rani Jha wishes to happen in the society. The two paintings- *Abortion Clinic* and *Husband* are more of the descriptive sense while this painting has more of normativity. This painting is the wish of Rani Jha. She means to say that there are difficulties created by the society. Nonetheless, the women should listen to each other and find the ways for the problems. This painting thus is a devising of the solution to a deeper female crisis. "Woman's proper sphere" (Bartky, P.13, 1990) remains an idea that requires to be materialized. This can be read as the

solution scene in which baby girl is with the mother and there is another lady to talk to her.

## CONCLUSION

Intrigued by the normative and descriptive visions of the painting, this article intended to analyze the Mithila painting, particularly, the paintings of Rani Jha from Mithila region. Thus, the conclusion can be drawn that the paintings incorporate the alternative visions of the reality. The descriptive vision portrays what is happening in the society whilst the normative vision of the painting depicts the wish of the painter. The painters do not only demonstrate what is happening in the society, they also show what should happen in the society. This visionary dimension of the painters is portrayed in the paintings of Rani Jha. In addition, the Abortion Clinic and Husband Leaving: the two paintings show the sufferings of the women. The third painting entitled Two Women depicts the fresher view of the society that embraces hope and optimism in Rani Jha.

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