

Foregrounding the Feminine Principle in Pushpa Kumari's Contemporary Mithila Painting

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Abstract

This paper explores artist Pushpa Kumari's female-centered perspectives in Mithila Paintings that foreground the grace of Shakti, goddess Kali, in all females. Moreover, it examines the agency of women as a source of fertility and energy centralizing on how the bi-union of Prakriti and Purusha, the cosmicized versions of the earthly phenomenal male and female, reflects one integrated form, an indivisible whole. Basically, the paper is based on Kumari's preference for tantrism, which accepts fundamental dualism, through which an individual encounters universal phenomena. Thus, this paper will provide a new insight on females' subjectivity—how in tantric rituals every woman, a counterpart of feminine principle, as a microcosmic version of feminine power shakti becomes a reincarnation of cosmic energy symbolizing the ultimate essence of reality.

Keywords: *Feminine principle, mithila painting, tantrism, Prakriti and Purush*

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Introduction

A Pushpa Kumari, one of the contemporary younger generation Mithila artists, is an Indian Madhubani painter. She has embarked on the Mithila paintings' distinctive styles and conventions while establishing a relationship between the art and the social practices. Integrating the theme of ancient Holy Scriptures, myths and the modern events, she establishes her painting as a medium to pass down the social values to the coming generation. Her uniqueness, as a Mithila artist, is reflected in her advanced creativity—her centuries-old-rooted art tradition has incorporated traditional ideas with contemporary treatment. To represent the theme of invariably love and fertility, Kumari has used different approaches in her art. Basically her mythological and folk themes in arts are treated with tantric symbolism, wherein she overtly foregrounds the feminine principle through the streaks of tantrism.

Tantrism vindicates that the union between male and female reduplicates the love world of Shiva and Parvati in miniature. Women, the complementary counters of men, help them be united with the one through her agency. It, therefore, justifies how women help men to achieve the ultimate essence of reality. Knut A. Jacobsen (1996) has also identified dualism of male-female principle to attain liberation, and to understand the ultimate reality, “Tantrism is the understanding the divine and the world as being sexually polarized into male and female aspects. The female pole of Tantric Hinduism is understood as an active principle and the source of the world” (p. 43). In this way, tantrism borders on the feminine principle. Being inspired with tantric theme, Kumari identifies women as the active principle in this sexually divided world, and thus, illustrates the primal place of women, as a microcosmic version of feminine power Shakti, in her Mithila art.

Objectives:

This research intends to examine the agency of women in Mithila folk art that interprets the underlying layered multi-meaning in Pushpa Kumari's hand-picked Mithila paintings. Moreover, it aims to discern the interrelationship between Mithila painting and woman subjectivity.

Theoretical Framework

The analytical framework of this research is primarily based on Ajit Mookerjee and Madhu Khanna's (1977) concept on tantrism from *The Tantric Way: Art. Science. Ritual* for conceptual interpretation, and socio semiotics as a tool to analyze how the implicit and explicit meanings of Mithila paintings are culturally specific. It has incorporated such socio-semiotics lens broadly from Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen's "Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design (2006)"—a framework to study images on the basic of three functions outlined by Halliday's Functional Grammar (1985) that studies visual structure to opt out the particular interpretation of experiences linguistically.

Ferdinand de Saussure (2011) defines semiology as "A Science that studies the life of signs within society" (p. 16). Social Semiotics, then, is a social theory that studies the signs of the texts in relation with the society. Daniel Chandler (2017) states, "Semioticians study how meanings are made and how reality is represented (and indeed constructed) through signs and sign systems" (p. 2). He further says, "The key notion in any semiotics is the 'sign'" (6). "Signs take the form of words, images, sounds, odours, flavours, actions, events, objects, and so on, but these have no intrinsic meaning and become signs only when we invest them with meaning" (Chandler, 11). As per the socio-cultural context, the sign makers always produce such signs creating a balance between the form and its meaning, the signifier and the signified respectively. Mithila painting, an exclusively feminine school of folk painting (Paswan, 2018), also uses several signs, icons and symbols to

convey its covert meaning more explicitly. Social semiotics, here, analyze the unit of meanings in the used signs according to the social and cultural circumstances.

According to Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen (2006), “Human societies use a variety of modes of representation; each mode has, inherently, different representational potentials, different potentials for meaning-making; each mode has specific social valuation in particular social contexts” (p. 41). Meaning-making, especially in social semiotics, is a social practice entirely based on the ideologies, systems and practices existing in the society. Kress and Leeuwen have built the grammatical base that focus on the dramatic semiotic shift from verbal to visual in relation within the framework of three metafunctions developed by Halliday: the ideational, the interpersonal and the textual functions. In their words:

“Visual design, like all semiotic modes, fulfils three major functions. To use Halliday’s terms, every semiotic fulfils both an ‘ideational’ function, a function of representing ‘the world around and inside us’ and an ‘interpersonal’ function, a function of enacting social interactions as social relations. All message entities – texts – also attempt to present a coherent ‘world of the text’, what Halliday calls the ‘textual’ function – a world in which all the elements of the text cohere internally, and which itself coheres with its relevant environment” (15).

In the same line, May Wong (2019) assumes in social semiotics meaning-making is always multimodal (2). Thus, semiotic activities involve “a sequence of production, transformation and development, moving from the initial task of joining images of the same objects – a classificatory, cognitive, conceptual, semiotic and manual task – to that of producing complex and dissimilar images, and finding likeness in them (or imposing likeness on them) through an intermediary task of abstraction and generalization” (Kress & Leeuwen, 2006, p. 37. Throughout this process, the potentiality of meaning is derived

from the study of the sign in a particular social context. “From the point of view of social semiotics, truth is a construct of semiosis, and as such the truth of a particular social group arises from the values and beliefs of that group (Kress & Leeuwen, 2006, p. 154,155). In short, the interconnection between the ideas presented through the multiplicity of modes in visual images and the social context is studied in social semiotics.

In application of social-semiotics, Pushpa Kumari’s arts establish an association between feminine principle and tantrism. Tantrism, as a religious path, regards the feminine principle and treat women with a reverence. The conventional thought among Maithil women is gradually shifting after being influenced by tantrism. Dermot Killingley (2015) defines ‘Tantrism’ as a movement within Buddhism and Hinduism that pursues salvation through integration between the human organism and the cosmos. Ajit Mookerjee and Madhu Khanna (1977) argue, “Tantra provides a synthesis between spirit and matter to enable man to achieve his fullest spiritual and material potential” (9). It is the feminine principle, the creative force and the female essence within women, which paves the way to the individual’s inner spiritual conscience—a journey directed towards self-enlightenment. The feminine principle, in this sense, gives the signal of wholeness of life evoking the realization of unity. Such a unity and the interplay between feminine and masculine principle makes the male and female complete, which is called “Siva-Sakti, Cosmic Consciousness...eternally conjoined; the one cannot be differentiated from the other” (Mookerjee and Khanna, 1977, p. 15).

With an emphasis on how tantrism paves the way to spiritual attainment of liberation Georg Feuerstein (1998) states, “The Tantric path is itself referred to a *sadhana* (from the same verbal root as *siddha*), and the spiritual achievement of this path is called *siddhi* (having the dual meaning of perfection and ‘powerful accomplishment)) (p.4). The indivisible whole unity between Shiva and Shakti turns out to be possible due to the

practice of tantrism. Through tantrism, women, therefore, can carry on their feminine principle. Moreover, I Wayan Budi Utama (2016) also argues that tantrism upholds feminine principle, “The important record that the teachings of Tantrism have is the central position of Sakti (Parvati), the Pradhana aspect of Shiva. Sakti in this sense can be developed as an aspect of womanhood, feminism” (p. 56).

Analysis

With an intense alacrity to give Kobar paintings an inventive touch, Kumari persistently seeks out the novel subjects from the society so that she can extend the boundaries of her art. Soma Gosh (2020) asserts innovation in Mithila painting is inevitable, and the novel themes are introduced to give it a new appeal. While making the ideational choices, the objects that Kumari represents shows relations in a world outside as signs. These signs carry both ideational and interpersonal metafunction, “any mode has to be able to represent a particular social relation between the producer, the viewer and the object represented” (Mookerjee & Khanna, 1977, p. 51). Kumari’s innovative efforts have ultimately altered the modes and metafiction of traditional Kobar paintings—the wall paintings of the nuptial chamber designed on the occasion of marriages and other ceremonies to inculcate the doctrines to newlyweds. In complete interaction among the artist, the reader and the concept, Kumari’s arts highlight how the paintings foregrounds the feminine principle through the marks of tantrism.

Mithila art is intertwined with Mithila culture, it has therefore a sociological significance. The artist who makes meaning from the context, has to change their judgment as per the change in social context. In this connection, Jay L. Lekme (1990) proclaims, “Just as communities have specific ways of connecting texts to one another, thematically or actionally, so they also construct characteristic patterns of relationships among activity

structures and thematic formations of themselves” (p. 205). In Pushpa’s enlivening Madhubani paintings, the artistic excellence in the use of stylistic devices with different signs has subtly challenged the women’s representation in the art. In fact, these visual images have communicated its historical and cultural significance to disclose the veiled feminine principle, i.e how female embodies the power of *Shakti*.

Ajit Mookerjee and Madhu Khanna (1977) affirms the same universal power of Sakti is transmitted to other general women with their fertility, “Sakti’s universal power is prime mover and mother womb of the recurring cycles of the universe, and as such reflects the procreative powers of eternal substance” (p. 16). The concept of tantrism, for this reason, has replaced the earlier notion of subservience women—women as passive object with their agency and subjectivity. Maithil women’s agency in their feminine principle, which privileges their ability of creation and fertility, is shown in figure 1:

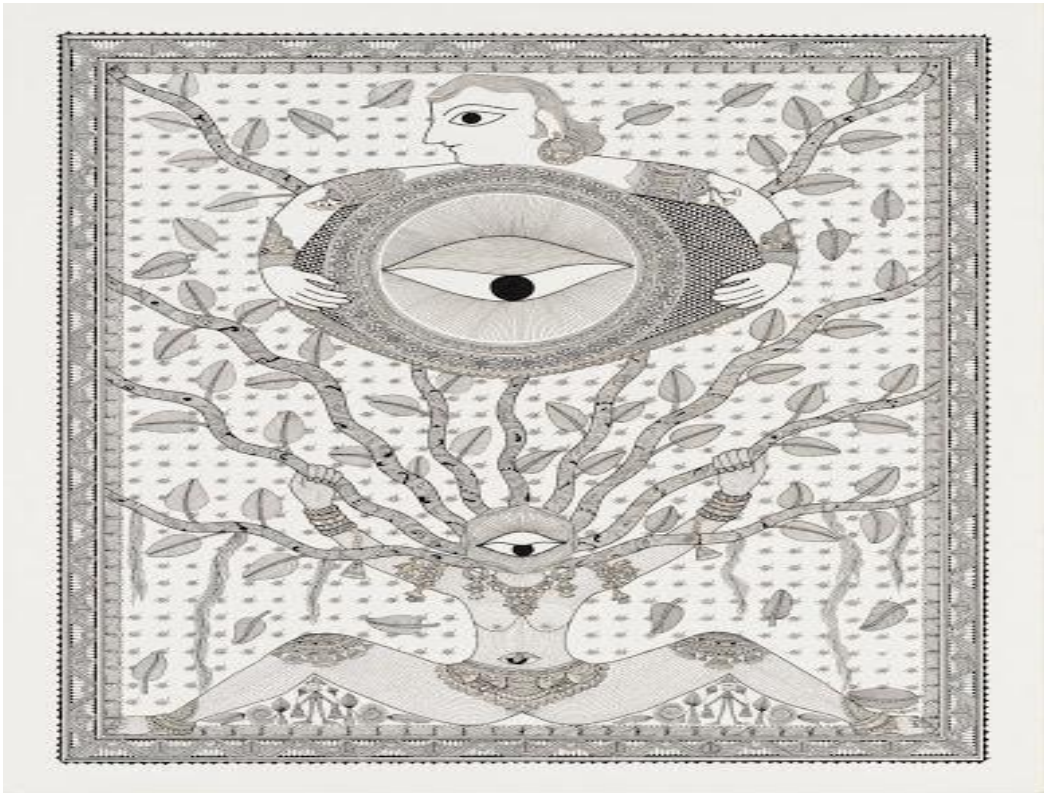


Fig 1: Painting of Prakriti Purusha (male and female eternity) by Pushpa Kumari

Pushpa Kumari's painting in fig. 1 justifies how *Prakriti*, who represents female figure, lies in the center of the universe. This symbolic portrait discloses *Prakriti's* prominent position in the earth, where her wide-stretched legs imply the females' fertility and productive power. With an ability to generate new lives, she allows the branches to grow from her shoulders. Besides, her face is portrayed as a single eye, and above it, a larger eye, which rested on the branches, is embraced by the *Purusha* (male). While altering the relationship among these signs into linguistic form, each sign used in the art shows how creation and fecundity are intertwined, and thus inseparable from the bodiless spirit. The

designations, *Prakriti* and *Purusha*, Sanskrit terms for eternal male and female elements, come from a branch of Hindu philosophy associated with Tantric teachings. Ajit Mookerjee and Madhu Khanna define the titles in *The Tantric way*:

Purusha is identified as Cosmic Consciousness, whose nature is static and which is the transcendental plane where there is but one undifferentiated unity, Siva, *Prakriti*, Nature is synonymous with *Sakti* (female energy); the kinetic energy quantum of the cosmos is the prime mover of the creation, out of which the whole world is born and into which the world is dissolved. *Purusha* and *Prakriti* are the cosmicized versions of the earthly, phenomenal male and female. (16)

The branches symbolize the communion of the universe *Prakriti* and *Purush* where the universe, as a whole, is within *Prakriti*, and *Prakriti* herself is regulator of the universe. She has a power, which in itself, entails the prerogatives both of subjectivity and social clout. Her feminine quality as spirit is reflected in Loriliai Biernacki's (2007) words, "The god Siva—who usually is conceived as supreme spirit—is actually a mere corpse (sava), a dead body, mere matter, without feminine principle (*sakti*). The male god is the "dead body" while the female is the enlivening "spirit". Iconographically, this appears in the well-known image of the goddess Kali astride the corpse Siva" (62). Thus, the feminine principle is not only matter, it is spirit that the male entails. Through painting, Kumari allows the viewers to scrutinize the represented concepts embedded within the complexes of signs which cling both internally and externally, with each other and with the context in simultaneously. Together it conveys a sense that like *Prakriti*, all women are accorded with subjectivity, yet the recognition of their spiritual competence and creative power is a prerequisite to establish such agency within women.

Kumari's work in figure 2, which is built in a strong theme of sexuality, unveils the symbolic unity of two primordial lovers Shiva and Shakti in the background, and

amalgamation of the intertwined snakes in the foreground. This integration of male and female force, especially in Mithila culture, strikingly exposes the tantric theme. While transforming the meanings of the applied signs in linguistic form, it reveals the fact that the whole world, the entire manifold of experience is Siva-Sakti, *Purush* and *Prakriti*—the male and female. They unite as one, as tantra accepts, “Reality is unity, an indivisible whole. It is called Siva-Sakti, Cosmic Consciousness” (Mookerjee & Khanna, 1977, p. 15).

Deconstructing the tradition symbols of Kobhar painting, Kumari centralizes the love of a coiled snake, and amalgamation of *Prakriti* and *Purusha* at the heart of the universe to demonstrate how “the objective world, with its infinite diversity, evolves out of the union of the opposites, the male and the female principle” (Mookerjee & Khanna, 1997, p. 17). Here, tantra that prefers the union of heart, however, makes a distinction between momentary pleasure and the joy of union. On the basis of this tantric interpretation, Kumari again exposes a deeply important semantic dimension—the feminine principle as an active principle, a medium to provide the knowledge of super consciousness. Depicting the union of *Prakriti* and *Purush* in a sexual state whose centrality is held by Goddess Kali further elaborates how the whole creation of the universe is protected and channelized by the female. Thus, the painting depicts the feminine principle, an embodiment of Sakti, as the reincarnation of cosmic energy that symbolizes the ultimate essence of reality.

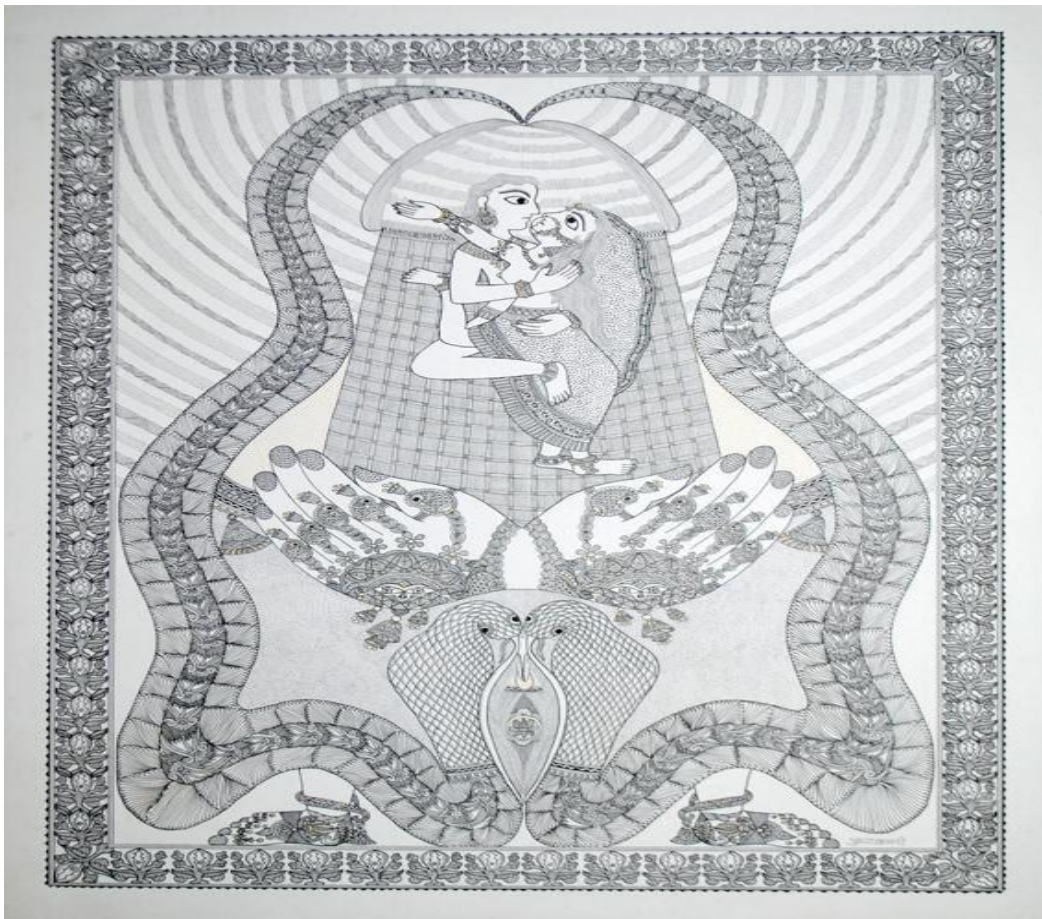


Fig. 2: Prakriti and Purusha

Kobhar painting basically focuses on the theme of fertility. The painting illustrated with fertility motif in figure 3 highlights premodical goddess Kali's yoni at the stage of giving birth who "is acclaimed as the highest principle of the cosmos—the power of creation, preservation and destruction, the ground of being" (Dascal, 2012, p. 226). The portrait symbolizes female as source of creation. The painting in *kachani* style, use of less colour, seeks to ensure the woman's active agency—the one with an ability to give birth to a new life.

The floral design of kobhar exposes a continuum of five pair of heads and hands of women attached to the yoni of the Goddess kali in the center. Along with the absence of conventional icons like the moon, sun, tortoise, snake, lotus and bamboo trees as a symbol of the female and male genitalia, the figure privileges to female's reproductive organ through which the new life emerges. It deconstructs the traditional kobhar painting since it expunges the bamboo stalk in the center surrounded with purain. While patriarchal society, to be bias, limits female's agency, Pushpa Kumari here places the spotlight on creative potentiality of women, pulls them in the center. Similarly, the whole deconstruction hinges on the projection of the active role of Maithali women in continuation of the whole universe. It vicariously displays the women's centrality and subjective expression despite of their limited freedom. Hence, yoni, the emblem of Sakti, as the creative force of the universe is shown exotically in the painting.



Fig. 3: Yoni

Throughout, Kumari also emphasizes on how Maithail women's perception regarding sexuality is gradually changing. They not only take intercourse as a physical basis of creation and evolution, but they also assume it as the cosmic union of two opposites, male and female principle. Hence, these days, the females give more priority in making love for ecstasy which is evident in figure 4. Here the sexual ecstasy is privileged to fertility; however, both are crucial aspects of Mithila painting.



Fig. 4: Intoxication

Suggesting a deeper meaning as per the underlying assumption of the society, a young Mithila artist Kumari departs from the traditional thought of fertility as a conjugal bliss, rather she focuses on the elation of bi-union. The centered depiction of *Prem Jalkida*, the intoxication of love and attraction, in figure 4 explicitly shows the moment of supreme bliss. There two lotus flowers with human faces bend towards each other during intoxication, and beneath the flowers, a pair of peacocks enjoy in ardor, appear entwined taking rest in the gently undulating water. This pond life, where flora and fauna are shown in an intoxicated state, signifies the importance of physical love in Maithil society within a strong sense of unity and cohesion. The stunning lotus flowers in the painting, of course, embody fertility, divinity, prosperity, eternity as well as spirituality.

The linear composition with framing, top to bottom approach, in painting also divulges the core significance of pond in Maithil women's life, which is particularly associated with marriage, joyfulness and fertility. The pond illustrated in the figure is more similar to Kamala Pond that has its own historical and cultural values in Mithila culture. Moreover, the polarized representation of the sun and the moon in their amalgamation not only shows life that gives energy, but it also indicates contentment of sexual harmony.

When the Sun's heat and water from the pond mingle, new life emerges. Multiple lives can evolve. Kumari, who gives the message—without love, creation is not possible—shows everyone is intoxicated in love in the figure. It also reflects her privileges to erotic flavor. According to Mookerjee and Khanna (1977), “This joy of union is equated with supreme bliss (ananda), obliterating differences between male and female in a state of complete union. In this state all impulse and function become Siva- Sakti. This ecstasy is experienced as the Kundalini rises and unfold itself” (p. 26). Despite the focus in motherhood and reproduction, it overly displays the bi-union of male and female in zoom size. A pair of ducks and lotus having the face of male and female alternatively, for instant, is shown in the state making love. As a kobhar painting, it includes an assembly of signs with special meaning. These signs convey the deeper meaning concomitant with the transcendental quality that establishes the linkage with the cosmogonic and metaphysical concept of tantra. The same sexual motif is portrayed in Kumari's next painting which is exposed in fig. 5.



Fig. 5: Surya and Sangya (The story of the Sun and his Wife)

As Puspa Kumari covers wide range of mythical aspects in her paintings, here she makes an innovative illustration of Mythical story of Surya and Sangya where Surya means the sun and Sangya, the daughter of a sage and the goddess of cloud, is his wife to expose the sexual reality. As story reveals, Sangya's happiness vanishes soon when she notices the increment of heat of Surya after their marriage. Being frightened, she runs away from him

to the earth in the form of horse, so does Surya. In their transformed form, once again, they fall in love and copulate happily. Highlighting this story, Kumari approves how “Micro-sex (small sex) is the biological foundation of macro-sex (big sex)...all sexual phenomena in nature are designed to produce a result, a blending of the genetic codes of two members of the same species” (Mookerjee & Khanna, 1997, p. 164). Pond’s life, especially small lotus flowers and enthusiastic ducklings, in addition, demonstrates the fertility motif of the artist. Amid the probability of fertility, the grown-ups are predominantly enjoying their synchronization. Here, the indissoluble harmony is resulted from the mystic connection of an individual being and universal being that symbolizes the embodiment of cosmic energy on each individual body.

Conclusion

As Pushpa Kumari’s creative insight and artistic quality in her paintings not only reveals the myth and context of Mithila society but they also foreground the feminine principle. Since women are, as tantrism claims, microcosmic version of feminine power *sakti* or *Prakriti*, they are essential parts within the dualism of male-female principles to attain liberation, and to be united with the ultimate essence of reality. Pushpa's art is more about how the forces governing the cosmos on the macro-level govern the individual in micro-level. These arts, therefore, divulge the fact that the outer self is only a small projection of the larger inner self. The human body with its psychological and biological functions, in fact, is a vehicle through which the dormant psychic energy, Kundalini Sakti, can be awakened that finally unites one with the cosmic consciousness. This stands possible solely through the active agency of women. Kumari with her paintings brings forth the women’s subjectivity in forefront, and tries to empower all people, especially the women, with the tantric facts. Gyatri Savita Kumari and Mahesh Kumar (2020) emphasize on how

mithila paintings psychologically empowered Maithil women, “Mithila painting is more than an art, hopes and aspirations to the people” (p. 539). By taking a detour from tantric theme embedded to the paintings, Pushpa’s paintings can also be used to undertake a study on the changing perspectives on Maithili women.

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