

Interpretation of Body by Modern Indian Artists

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Abstract

The human body was already at the center of human thought process through artistic expression and human culture. Art is also similarly ancient and evolved over time. If we consider our contemporary history, the body has already taken centre stage not just in the creation of art but in nearly every aspect of human life. The 'body' has been portrayed from the beginning of humanity before the postmodern period but their shape and role shift with the course of time and circumstance, differing from the socio-political situation of the time and being transformed or shaped in one direction or another. The development of modern art in India through the 20th Century has shown its expressions in manifolds. This development was always influenced by various contemporary issues, such as, British colonialism and its domination, Swadeshi Movement, Influence of contemporary Western art, Independence of India, social and political developments of the independent India etc. However the paper will explore and analyse these aspects taking examples of the works of some important artists of the last century who are often termed as modern artists of India.

Keywords: Modern Art, Indian Art, Body in Art, Pre-independent Indian Art, Post-independent Indian Art.

Introduction

As human civilization and art both equally old and developed through time period human body was always at the centre of human thought process in artistic expressions. If we talk about our present day culture, then the body has already placed in the forefront of not only in art making but almost in all field of human existence. From starting of civilization the 'body' has been represented, since primitive age till the postmodern era but their way of representation and purpose changes according to change in time and situation, it differs with the socio political scenario of that particular time and transformed or moulded in one way to other. The evolution of contemporary art in India over the twentieth century has taken several forms. This evolution was often inspired by numerous contextual subjects such as British colonization and its dominance, the Swadeshi Movement, the impact of contemporary Western art, India's independence, the social and political trends of independent India, and so on. There are some key developments in perception happened due to the circumstances impacted the artists' and their art practice before and after independence. So the values of constructional elements of visual arts were used contextually by aligning with the individual ideological framework of the artists.

Modern Artists of Pre-independent India

The common significance to art practice in many countries of colonial history could be intuited in the early and mid-1900s. It's an overall influence of Western art practice on creativity, the desire to dominate the concept of identity and language in Indian art and the dedication of a nation such as India to his position and work. The challenge towards the Western practice and the effort to rebuild the ethnic culture destroyed by the British began in early 1900 with the ongoing Nationalist or Swadeshi revolution generating momentum.

The influence of Ravi Varma's in pre-independent art scene was rapid. He was the most popular and pursued after Indian painter throughout his lifetime. The women in Raja Ravi Varma's paintings (Fig.1 & Fig.2) are typically laden with ornamentation and adopt the western standards of oriental feminine identity. The lavish garments, ornate jewels and sumptuous backdrops are all crafted with a specific appeal. In its peak

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it is beautiful and yet excites the western mind. And the east eye is strong for the West to imitate. Author Pran Neville stated,

"The Nautch Girls of India and 'Beyond the Veil- Indian Women in the Raj', His women, be they goddesses or village belles, are not true to life. They are what an ideal woman should be. And as far as the embellishment of women goes, he surpasses all artists in the East or the West."¹

These fantasies became a part of the national imagination. Even in his lifetime, his images of women became the unique selling point of the indigenous consumer industry and were to be found on match boxes, cosmetics and fabric labels. But his grace fell as dramatically as his growth. He was appreciated as a single genius in art history but he was threatened by Swadeshi Nationalist's art practitioner.

For them Ravi Varma became the average imitator in western academic arts from a national pride exemplifies a desire to oppose and condemn a country seeking to restore its ethnic integrity, its self-esteem. Only as the Indian art became stridently modern after Independence years and continued to survive for almost ninety years was this negation strengthened.

Soon the time shifted towards 'Swadeshi', the Bengal School of Art was founded in their efforts to revive the cultural traditions of the region, driven by the works of Abanindranath Tagore who is considered the founder of Modern Indian art. Abanindranath was not the first famous Bengali artist but he was the key who succeeded in introducing an art movement that eventually transformed Indian art and set the steps to enter in modern era.² The movement was supported by such important intellectuals and art authorities like Rabindranath Tagore, Sister Nivedita, Earnest B. Havell, C. F. Andrews, Sri Aurobindo and Ananda Coomaraswamy. They helped defining and broaden the idea of school by their words.

This trend had originally affected Bengal, primarily Kolkata and Santiniketan, but expanded across India soon afterwards. Abanindranath Tagore was followed by Benod Behari Mukherjee, Nandalal Basu, Gaganendranath Tagore, D.P. Roy Choudhury, Rabindranath Tagore and others by their artistic imagination, sought to recreate the features of ancient Indian art styles and attempted to redefine Rajput and Mughal architecture. These artists actually rethought and worked on Asian style giving emphasis on Indian nationalism. From Nandalal Bose's representation of Indian mythology women to Asit Halder's depiction of Ajanta's cave art or Sujata's sculpture in Santiniketan by Ram Kinkar Baij the depictions of art during this time remained deeply rooted in Indian history and culture. The allegorical portrayal of Bharat Mata by Abanindranath Tagore depicts a saffron clothed lady who is dressed like a jogini carrying in her four hands a poem, paddy sheaves, a piece of white cloth and a garland. 'Bharat Mata' was a part of the growth of self-consciousness for freedom. Abanindranath Tagore portrayed Bharat Mata in 1905 as a four-armed Hindu goddess wearing saffron-colored robes, holding a book, sheaves of rice, a mala, and a white cloth. The iconic image of Bharatmata (Fig.3) created

nationalist feeling in Indians during the freedom struggle. The image was imaginative with Bharatmata standing on green earth and blue sky behind her feet with four lotuses, four arms meaning divine power white halo and sincere eyes. The historical context, in which Abanindranath painted Bharatmata was the Swadeshi Movement sparked off in 1905 around the partition of Bengal. This image does not incorporate the map of India instead it had followed the protocols of the emergent Neo-Bengal revivalist style of depicting the female form as ethereal and austere.

Jamini Roy

Jamini Roy (1887-1972) shifted his attention on the immediate reality surrounding him. Jamini Roy was among the first to turn back on Ajanta and the classical practice in Bengal. He began afresh with a Neo-primitivism based on Bengal's living folk paintings. His highly formalized style opened up a breach, by which he poured out a considerable avant-garde of young artists, meant to break with the past, be modern and start exploring of the same experimental processes that led to some of the Western modern styles. Roy switched to his heritage in traditional customs and practices, and did a detailed study of Santhal tribals' folk paintings. He produces a theme with clear angular lines and bright colours, showing the potential path to be taken to explore an indigenous language and sensitivity. For very specific reasons Jamini Roy used the Pat traditions. It was not the essence and social and religious activities of the art of the common people of Bengal, but the formal aspects that it represented in the development of its style and its bright colours. Jamini Roy brings Indian art a new understanding. His paintings did not match the form and subjects of the Bengal school of art but retained the nationalist philosophy, glorifying ancient Indian cultures and practices. He represented the body of both men and women very boldly as shown in (Fig.4). The voluptuous body with big almond heads, round faces, large decorative shapes can be traced within tribal communities and the ancient Kalighat paintings, his themes being a dancing people, brides, people of a traditional Bengali family, mother-child relationship, Krishna, and others. With the mainstream art practice, the tribal and folk art was also emerging and evolved in smaller areas developing to enrich itself with symbolic expressions and philosophical ideologies. Among them the depiction of women body in Bengal pata-chitra is an extremely interesting area to explore.

Amrita Shergil

Amrita Shergil's paintings depicted people and more often women. She was fascinated by the female figures who became subject in most of her paintings. Amrita Sher-Gil, in context not just the individual as a woman artist but to note the portrayal of 'selves' by women in her works, both traditionally and cross-cultural. Her concepts are an epistemological pillar that is the fundamentality in modern Indian art. Her portraits were sensuous and sensitive expressions were a personal touch in treatment. Even the treatment of body and surrounding were of very warm colour palette like

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bright red, orange, white, green etc. she created her own fusion of combining the foreign with Indian art tradition. Her initiative was to facilitate the Indian tradition with her Persian training. She was also influenced by Ajanta, Pahari, Rajasthani, Mughal miniatures which had profound effects on her paintings. Geeta Kapoor Stated that, "Her art language involved the use of indigenous resource in the context of her nascent sympathy for the modernizing nation; she hopped to use it as a critical reflex against her personal narcissism"³.

She painted a huge number of sensuous nude when she was in Paris and soon felt an urge to return to India. Amrita Shergil stated that, "I began to be haunted by an intense longing to return to India and feeling in some strange way that there lay my destiny as a painter"⁴ Her paintings were always remaining focused to women, their village life and activities, miseries and sufferings and expressed in bright and rich colours which were very much an Indian palette. Amrita rediscovered her root in India and keen interest in daily lives. Her paintings Brahmacharis, Women in red, The Story Teller, Brides toilet as in (Fig.5) etc. only focus on that. The figure in her paintings has an introvert nature and full of depression in faces. As a woman artist she was more keen to paint women and studied all the schedules done by them in daily life. She was hyper sensitive and many works rapidly self-possessed. Geeta Kapoor stated that,

"The contemporary [is] elevated to the level of the classical. In a tragically brief career, Sher-Gil did much to introduce her country to the idea of the free-spirited artist and to show them that art could interpret Indian life for Indians"⁵.

Among her famous paintings the ancient story teller, the bride, the swing and Woman resting on charpoy (Fig.6) all are about the women, their gestures as their identical language. Women resting on charpoy has a very calm and still but a sensitive understanding of psychology of a village woman, a visual and realization of bindings forced on her by social situations. Her women for the first time were not a passive viewer. She gazes directly towards the viewer for offerings. Each of her painting had an ambience of real existence of nomadic life and sufferings. Most of the painted women and men are either of young age group or middle aged home maker. Women were surrounded by the mud walls, wearing costumes with dishevelled forms, soft skin textures and very sensible expressions of eyes were very obvious in treatment of Amrita. In her painting of woman reclining on charpoy she painted a bright red garment and a dark complexion for her which was a rare approach in that time period of Indian Modern Art era so it has a realistic approach of life in respect feminine identity. The woman in this painting was completely covered with red garments which show a dominating influence of patriarchal society with a conceptual stress. The whole environment is surrounding the figure also very important. It shows interior of a village mud house and bringing in attention the absence of aesthetics and sensuousness for exploration of a domestic sphere.

The bright red garment of the woman symbolizes her marital status and sindoor shows her marital life with restrictions. Shergil's painting looks like a satire for an erotic love. Again the four red stands of charpoy seem to be the societal boundations of a young bride similar to a cage. Her portraits and figures were treated sensuously.

Modern Artists of Post-independent India

Arpita Singh

Arpita Singh was an eminent painter of modern Indian art scenario. Born in 1937 in Kolkata, West Bengal. She is known as a modernist figurative painter. Her canvases have a narration and a carnival of strange rebellious arrangements of visual imageries. She explores her canvas without knowing the ultimate end. Her work identifies her cultural background and brings an emotional journey and inner vision about women effected by the society and their day to day life story. She is very much inspired by the Indian aesthetic and tradition folk art practice and enhances her paintings throughout. She mentioned that viewers should perceive her work from women perception. Gayatri Sinha stated that,

"Arpita Singh has pushed the visual lexicon of the middle-aged woman further than almost any other woman artist. The anomaly between the aging body and the residue of desire, between the ordinary and the divine and the threat of the violent fluxes of the impinging external world gives her work its piquancy and edge. At the same times she critiques the miasma of urban Indian life with suggestive symbols of violence that impinge on the sphere of the private, creating an edgy uncertainty"⁶.

She has taken her inspiration of visual elements from traditional Indian culture and women's regular practices as being a part of that culture. Arpita has deeply influenced by Bengals kantha traditional stitching practices and created a unique visual culture of interweaving this tradition and the urban life style together as we can see in painting Pink Pillow (Fig 7). Graffiti, child art as an urban practice also had a major influence and uses them as sign language to create an environment to her figurative paintings. In her paintings Security check (Fig.8) she has shown a nude woman with bare skin, her inner genital organ is also shown matured. Behind this women figure there is another woman wearing a white saree with a red blouse which is actually the same woman just before the security check. The silhouetted security guards were shown as the symbol of power and as a woman she deliberately showed her insecurity and the upraised hands are to surrender towards power of patriarchal society. Where the security check is for protection but the unclothed woman shows that conquering the personal security of women signs of vulnerability.

Jogen Chowdhury

Another eminent modernist artist from Bengal whose contribution has an immense impact to another perceptual understanding of body and its compassion in Indian art scenario. Born in Faridpur, West Bengal 1939 and studied in Government College of Art and Craft, Kolkata. He was the former Professor of Kala-Bhavana, Santiniketan and ex-

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curator of Rastrapati Bhavana Museum in 1972. His artistic exploration and progression throughout was quite impressive. He is completely focused of human figures and achieved an immense mastery in unbroken use of lines. In his painting Tiger in the Moonlight Night as in (Fig.9) completely a juxtaposition of emotions of real and unreal, between knowing and unknowing takes the whole space a personal expression and appealing visual manifestation on other way a subjective and collective consciousness. According to him, a spatial sequence was worked out, but it (the space) was not complex. The artist has explained "Now there's an effect of distancing. The moment I depict the entire figure, interest in the details would be lost."⁷

Earlier at the beginning he was deeply influenced of powerful political movements in Kolkata. As an artist, those inspired him greatly. His work was impacted by a series of socio-political uprisings such as the partition and the famine of India carried of sufferings and darkness. It also transmitted an aura of mystery and denoting disappointment. His figures show the career of deep pains and scars and textured with spider net like black ink cross hatching to show the rough wrinkled surface of skin over the fleshy tint of underneath skin with an application of soft pastel as we can see in painting Couple A (Fig.10). He has always nurtured with the human relation, their love and sufferings with an extremely personal expression. Jogen Chowdhury concludes: "My memories, my thoughts, my dreams, and my immediate environment - they could all turn into subjects of my works."⁸

FN Souza

F N Souza was born in Goa in a very middle class family and his life span was 1924-2002. Through his hand art has received a new direction. Souza was born with a fecundity of creativity and intellect that was not always treated as an attribute but also as negative, so Souza had to face initial rejection. Such challenges Souza experienced when he was suspended from the school for performing naked graffiti on the walls from the scholastic days. His fascination with the female figure may be shown in these tales, but at that period his style of depicting them was very special it was very modern and not quite appropriate to Indian culture. The most portrayed feature of Indian paintings from the earliest era is elegance and grace with regard to the depiction of women. He was the founder of Bombay Progressive group where M.F Hussain, S.N Raza, K.H Ara, Gaitonde were the major artist of this group. This BPG was the backbone of Indian modern art for their immense contribution in art. Souza's work were of unique style with distorted figures with evil faces. Writer Mandakini Sarma stated that,

"The most influential feature of Souza's paintings like women the arrangement of devil-like beings. The representation of the women in his paintings was mainly presented in nude and semi-naked pose with massive genitals and menacing face, which somehow suggests certain gender dynamics with regard to the sex.

Souza was very much influenced by the gestures and postures of Khajuraho temple relief sculptures and panels and made similar visual imageries in his paintings. Souza depicts his woman in voluptuous body and seductive poses, mostly expressive and powerful genital parts sometimes bigger than the portrait⁹.

Even the breast parts are immensely huge, as a whole have highly erotic appeal. Souza has transformed the image of conventional practice of beautiful woman into demonic existence of woman. He has totally destroyed the sensual nudity of modest woman and as a result the human presence is less due to distortion of body parts to give the powerful representation of womanhood. He has used mostly vivid colour palettes like yellow, orange and blue with bold strokes to the figures as for example Untitled in (Fig.11) has shown distortion in figurative form with twisted facial expression gives an energy and power. The elongated face has shown rigidity and destroyed the softness of woman face. Souza had mention for his derivative men women relationship that,

"I have no desire to redeem myself or anybody else because man by his very nature sunredeemable, yet he hankers so desperately after redemption. I wanted to hang myself on the cross with my hands and feet nailed to it...to have arrows quivering in my neck like flies, while in the sweetness of love- making....to repose in absolute bliss, the bliss of Ananda (1959)"¹⁰.

His influence of Mathura and Khajuraho and transformation of female image into obsession can again see in 'Lajja Gouri' shown in (Fig.12) which has been excavated from seals of Indus valley civilization. It's also worshiped in Kamakhya temple as main idol in Assam as the worship of sexual union in this world and also represents the individual feminine power and identity in types of goddess. Souza with the creative desire of joy also overturned the symbol of female devotion and the shows the posture of welcoming romantic and sexual play.

Objective of the Study

The key intention of this study is to explore the specific aspects of using human body by the modernist artists of India in their works through the last century. This study will also try to explore the idea of the 'body' in the process of the linguistic development in order to establish their individualistic ideology in art.

Conclusion

Body in Art it can be concluded that it has become a contested site where many of the cultural discourses are played out. Artists have long focused on the body in painting and sculpture. With the gradual development of cultural interaction with the western world, the representation of body explores various new ways of experimentation. The changing political sphere and the urge of revitalisation of the cultural heritage of India find its way during the last decades of 19th century through the middle of the 20th century mostly in mythology, epics and literary works and in the heritage of sculpture and paintings. Human body was interpreted in iconographic representations, metaphoric characterisations, stylised body modelling

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inspired by folk art and Ajanta fresco and fantasizing reality in case. Though, this development can be seen as a part of shared philosophy in many cases. But since the 4th decade of the 20th century and around the time of independence the perception of body in Indian art perhaps got influenced by the western modern art of early 20th century. The progress is more individualistic, personified and collectively modern

approach where artists have expressed body as a tool but in multiple ways. Sometimes the body became an expression of sexuality from men's viewpoint and the same body turned into an expression of womanhood and gender identity and sometimes that same body became a metaphor of artist's socio-economical statement and so on.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10

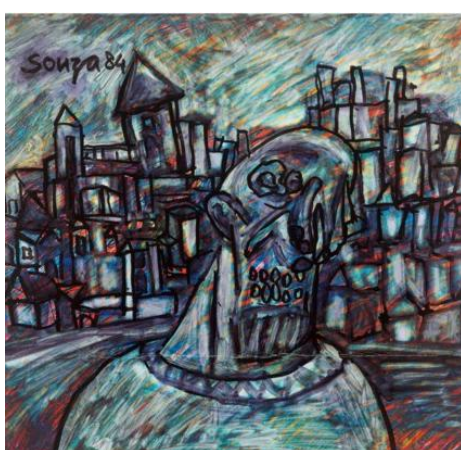


Figure 11



Figure 12
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Figure 1
Figure 2

Varma, Raja Ravi (1848-1906) Shakuntala and her friends, 1870. Oil on canvas
Varma, Raja Ravi (1848-1906), Kerala Beauty, Oil on canvas, Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad

Figure 3

Tagore, Abanindranath (1871-1951), Bharat Mata, 1905. Gouache on Paper, 26.6 x 15.5 cm. Victoria Memorial, Kolkata.

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- Figure 4** Roy, Jamini (1887-1972) Mother and child, 36cm x 73.5cm. NGMA, New Delhi.
- Figure 5** Shergill, Amrita (1913-1941) Brides Toilet, 1937. Amrita Shergil, Oil On Canvas, 146 x 88.8 cm, NGMA, New Delhi
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- Figure 11** Souza, F. N (1924-2002), Untitled, 1984, Mixed media and chemical alteration on magazine paper 21.6 x 22.5 cm. www.christies.com
- Figure 12** (Left Figure) Souza, F. N (1924-2002), Untitled, 1984, Mixed media and chemical alteration on magazine paper, 27.94cm x 20.32cm, Dhoomimal Art Gallery New Delhi (Right Figure) Lotus Headed Fertility Goddess, Lajja Gauri, ca. 6th century, India (Madhya Pradesh), sandstone sculpture, 10.3 cm x 10.3 cm., Samuel Eilenberg Collection, Bequest of Samuel Eilenberg, 1998, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Source. <http://images.metmuseum.org/CRDImages/as/original/DP253528.jpg>

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