

Role of Female Indian Artist in Reshaping Perceptions of Social Reality through Their Compelling Artworks

Reema. D

M.Sc., Visual Communication
Department of Visual Communication, Hindusthan College
of Arts & Science
Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India

Dr. Jone Antony Raja. J

Department of Visual Communication
Hindusthan College of Arts & Science
Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India

ABSTRACT - This study evaluates and discusses the works of two prominent Indian female artists, Arpita Singh and Anjolie Ela Menon whose work largely revolves around post - independence basing on contemporary urban middle class and psychological aspects in the transformation and re-formation of social perceptions that leans on the signs and symbols employed metaphorically in their art work. This paper is based on the field of semiotics and explores how these artists apply symbols, signs and other visual language to narrate intricate stories which oppose and re-define prevailing social realities. Their works are personal and collective and address the topics of gender, identity, and cultural transformation, which display much of the modern Indian art. It is aimed at studying how their works change the ways of passive observation of social norms to the reflection of gender relations, domesticity and resilience in India. Using semiotic analysis to paint their works, the signs and symbols incorporated in the paintings are used to impact the viewers' perception of their work and make them think critically of societal problems. The research I will carry out will be a qualitative one since I will be able to investigate in detail the meanings, experience, and symbolic expressions expressed in their artworks.

Keywords: *Semiotic Analysis, Female Indian Artists, Contemporary Indian Art, Social Perception, Visual Language.*

INTRODUCTION

Art has been an excellent tool of human narration and is like making us look different in the world. In India today, women artists like Arpita Singh and Anjolie Ela Menon are expressing and revealing more and less expressed experiences and stories through their art especially those that affect the women. They employ strong symbols and narratives that actually make the voices of those who are not heard in our societies count. The visual works of these artists do not just represent images but rather immerse and highly relate with concerns of gender, identity and cultural shifts. This study aims at analyzing and discussing how these two artists apply and exploit signs and symbols metaphorically in their paintings and how it can be utilized in challenging and re-interpreting contemporary societal views.

These signs and symbols in art may contain deeper meanings, and semiotics can assist us to interpret and make a more sense of the meanings behind these signs and symbols. Semiotics has a role in comprehending how meaning is made in art using signs and symbols. When we examine the visual

language of the artists in their works, we will be in a position to discover the stories of our common experiences. Such stories unfold how the artists interact with or challenge the societal norms, cultural changes or conventional gender roles. The works of the artists can also help us to examine new concepts on how our identities are shifting in India today that make us view the world and ourselves in new multifaceted ways. The paper will take a closer look at how Arpita Singh and Anjolie Ela Menon merge both their experiences and social issues and use their art to express their perceptions of social issues.

This is a qualitative study, and this implies that it will be in-depth in terms of exploring how these artists employ symbols and signs in their art as a form of expressing their ideas and their views about these issues. This paper demonstrates that this art of these women is not merely a reflection of what is in their world but how this art challenges people to stop and think even to change their perceptions of things in the world they live in. This paper demonstrates that these women artists are demonstrating their art as an effective weapon of creating awareness and changes in our world. These artists demonstrate through their works how they are utilizing their creative expression as a vehicle to demonstrate the fact that art can be a potent instrument of creating awareness and creating change in our world.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Art has been employed to represent any types of experiences, feelings, and narratives that govern our lives. The paintings of Indian women artists show the advanced emotions and stories that present a different approach towards their social, cultural and personal life. The female artists in India have used the figures in their art pieces to explain different issues related to body positivity, identity politics as well as social issues. These technological developments have provided the Indian female artists with a platform through which they can demonstrate their figures in their art works in a new way. One can refer to the works of such early 20 th century pioneers as Amrita Sher Gil who employed a combination of western styles and Indian sensibility which gave a new outlook to the figure of the woman in her art. The study research is centered on the use of figure by Indian female artists in their works of art as a form of expression. It has applied the qualitative analysis to assess the Use of the figure by Indian female artists as an effective communication tool. It has examined the concepts and opinions of such artists

as Amrita Sher Gil, Anupam Sud, the works of Arpita Singh, cultural, social, and gender-specific effects on their works.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Aim of the study

To discuss the visual symbols, stories and styles in works of art used by Arpita Singh and Anjolie Ela Menon.

To unveil the weakness of women and present the realities about them.

To transform and perceive the way people, view gender and identity in the modern India.

Scope of the study:

-To locate how they present the struggles and strengths of women with particular focus on the pieces of artwork that were selected among the artists Arpita Singh and Anjolie Ela Menon.

-To emphasize the symbols represented in the paintings of artists, which reflect social problems.

-The impact it has on the perception of people towards women in the society.

Research Approach:

The qualitative approach used in the study would enable us to explore deeper into the meaning of the symbols and signs in the works of Arpita Singh and Anjolie Ela Menon. In this way we get to find the concealed layers of the profound meaning of Indian art as well as get us to associate what we observe based on the rich cultural narratives and profound feelings of what lies back of it through:

Semiotic Analysis.

Research Objective:

RQ1: Notice the ways in which Arpita Singh and Anjolie Ela Menon apply symbols and metaphors in their art and pay attention to how their art brings out social issues and real-life experiences.

RQ2: Research the ways in which these two artists apply their themes of gender, social conflicts, and patriarchy in comparison to how their styles portray the same message, and the message these two artists communicate.

RQ3: Discover how these two artists use their artwork to showcase their experience that speaks of the challenges and strengths of women.

Research Question:

RQ1: How do Arpita Singh and Anjolie Ela Menon depict their artwork through the various symbols, metaphors, and stories about social realities in society?

RQ2: What are the similarities in the theme and style of the works of the two artists in the light of reflection of gender-related issues and social conflicts?

RQ3: How is the artwork of both artists a social commentary and to what extent are they effective in overcoming stereotypes about women?

RESEARCH DESIGN

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Arpita Singh and Anjolie Ela Menon paintings can be quite well interpreted regarding the semiotic theories suggested by Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes. This theory of Saussure can easily reveal the relationship between the image or the shape (signifier) and the concept that the image is referring to (signified), which can assist us observe the higher meanings of the visual images used by these artists. The connotation and denotation theory by Barthes assists us in interpreting the visual components employed in the works of art as well as the hidden messages contained within them, which are not always obvious. We can understand the fact that the signifier and the signified are linked through arbitrary relationships, which aids us in realizing that these artists are able to break the rules by establishing these relationships. The theory of ideology and myth proposed by Barthes gives us an understanding of the hidden meanings of the artworks of these female artists that sometimes refer to the ideas which the society tries to conceal or to the gender roles which are frequently not openly discussed.

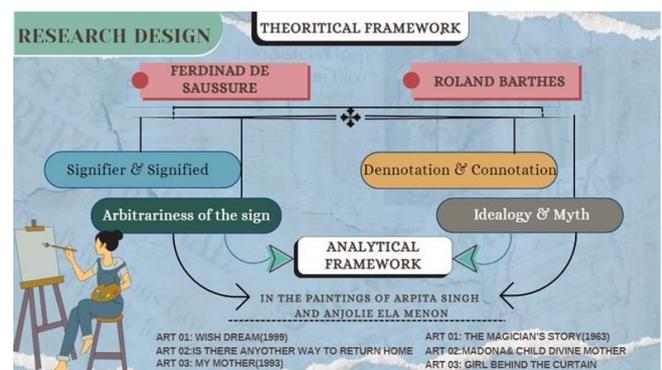


Figure 1.

The following explains each parameter applied in the selected paintings of Arpita Singh and Anjolie Ela Menon:

Signifier and Signified

The theory of Ferdinand de Saussure states that the physical expression of a sign is called the signifier, and that signifier could be a word, image, or a sound, but the meaning, or rather, idea the signifier expresses is referred to as a signified. A sign has a signifier and signified, and the relationship that exists between the two is not founded on any other association but convention. An example of a signifier would be the word tree which is an idea or a mental image of a tree.

Denotation & Connotation:

The literal meaning of a sign or the plain meaning is called its denotation. The fundamental description is the one which is concurred upon. Connotation, in its turn, is one step deeper than denotation and includes the cultural, emotional, and associative meaning that a sign generates. Such definitions vary according to the context or the person. An example of this is that a flower may be defined as the denotation meaning

of a rose, but it has many connotations with respect to the person or group who is required to interpret it. An example is that a rose is denoted as a flower; nevertheless, it has several connotations which vary according to an individual or group. According to Barthes, the first order of signification is denotation, but the second is connotation.

Arbitrariness of the Sign

According to Ferdinand de Saussure, the arbitrariness of the sign is the fact that there is no natural or necessary relation between the signifier, i.e., the form of the sign and the signified i.e., the concept that the sign symbolizes. The connection between a signifier and a signified is arbitrary, and it is only connected to each other through social convention in a particular language community. To illustrate, when we refer to a tree, we cannot say that it has anything to do with a tree in nature because it is arbitrary and accepted by people who speak a particular language. But it is in total a required component of language so that we can talk to one another.

Ideology and Myth

In a word, ideology is a concept that has been employed in the study of semiotics as a set of beliefs and values upon which the interpretation of signs is founded. Myth, being a second-order semiotic system by the definition of Roland Barthes, is the system of ideological beliefs and values as an expression of universal truth. Those signs or symbols that mask the created nature of meaning the values of the culture and the period into those signs are call.

Artworks Chosen

The study analyzes two female Indian artists – Arpita Singh & Anjolie Ela Menon. The artworks selected for this study is jotted below:

Paintings of Arpita Singh

- Wish Dream (1999)
- Is There Any Other Way to Return Home (2019)

Paintings of Anjolie Ela Menon

- The Magicians Story.
- Girl Behind the Curtain.

Data Analysis

My data collection would involve the analysis of the paintings of both the artists which implies as:

Paintings of Arpita Singh

1. Wish Dream (1999)



The application of the parameters in this painting contains the following:

Signifier and Signified

- The female figure in a sari (the signifier) is a symbol of the typical Indian woman or embodiment of strength, myth or God subject to interpretation (the signified).
- The recurrent use of blue-dressed women serves as a signifier to a group or spiritual congregation or the experience that women share.

Denotation and Connotation

- Denotation of the scene comprises of women seated, the symbolic vegetation, the bird and the colorful colors. The connotations are various.
- The goddess has the connotation of purity and enlightenment as depicted by the central figure placed on a higher plane and the pink lotus. The girls and the colorful birds are symbolic of community, dreams and aspirations.

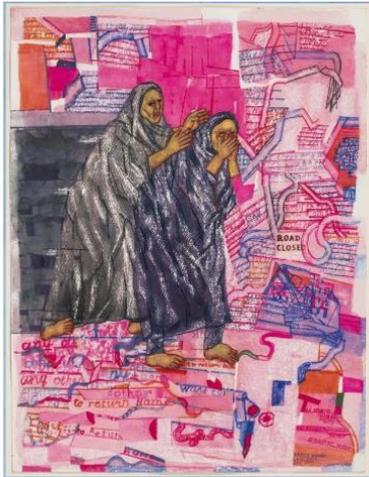
Arbitrariness of the Sign

- There is no denotative meaning of the lotus underneath the central woman. The lotus owes its meaning of purity, divinity, and femininity due to its culture.

Ideology and Myth

- The legends images of lotus and goddess like character to position the lady at the core of a protracted Indian female societal arrangement.
- It unveils the wish/dream as a political act, to consider the social status of women, their fighting, and dreams.

2. Is There Any Other Way to Return Home (2019)



The application of the parameters in this painting contains the following:

Signifier and Signified:

- The signifiers in this painting are the two veiled women, the written texts and maps at the background and the picture of the Road Closed. The women in the veils may be an indication of displacement or loss.
- The signifier of a barrier or the inability to go back could be the image of Road Closed and the texts written on the backdrop both of which may be referring to the refugees.

Denotation and Connotation:

- Denotatively, the picture depicts two barefoot veiled ladies walking across collages of different types of texts and map pictures. The semantic meaning of this scene is movement and searching in the chaotic city.
- Connotatively, the veiled women and the bare feet suggest innocence, exclusion or resistance against the powers. The road sign is a part of the composition, which suggests the presence of danger, control, and social barriers towards women or migrants.

Arbitrariness of the Sign:

- The signifier, the veiled body, and the signified, displacement/exclusion are culturally constructed.

Ideology and Myth:

- The theme of the painting by Singh interacts with the ideology and the myth of returning, or the human need to find the place where they belong, and they feel at home.
- Not only is there no question on how to get home, but the question itself is a commentary and a critique of the very idea of being home and how many people are unable to do it because of the ideological situation in which they are.

Paintings of Anjolie Ela Menon:



1. The Magicians Story.

The application of the parameters in this painting contains the following:

Signifier and Signified

- The visual facts of the picture: The Madonna figure and her calm mask-like face, the child, her protecting gesture (she raises her hand in front of her face). These facts imply concepts of motherly care, divinity, innocence, etc.
- The gesture of Madonna might imply blessing and defense, protection and separation, etc. The child might indicate innocence or submissiveness as is typical in Madonna and Child paintings.

Denotation and Connotation:

- Denotation: At the general level, we find a woman and a child on a blue and orange background with two cherubs on top. Her face is long and expressionless, almost like a mask. Her hand is up in a gesture.
- Connotation: The image has a lot of religious emotions. It is related to the Madonna and Child picture in the history of art. The blue represents either divinity or death; the orange represents enlightenment or warmth.

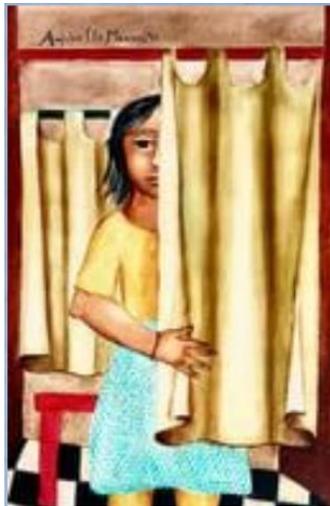
Arbitrariness of the Sign

- The correlation between these signs and their meanings is culturally conditioned. The hand that is raised, as in Christian art, symbolizes a blessing, but could symbolize a farewell or a caution in another way.
- The image creates no sacred content, but the conventions that the viewers apply to the image.

Ideology and Myth:

- The myth of mother-child archetype is a representation of love, protection, and sacrifice.
- It may also be used to make the myths, the lack of expression, the masklike nature, the gesture etc. hard

2. Girl Behind the Curtain.



The application of the parameters in this painting contains the following:

Signifier and Signified

- **Signifiers:** The key signifiers are the girl, the curtain half uncovered, the low light and the gaze. The curtain is a signifier on the one hand as a tangible object, and on the other hand as a symbol.
- **Signified:** The concepts that these signifiers bring about are those of concealment, waiting, and transformation. Hiding behind the curtain, the girl is a symbolic representation of the reality of hiding and change, including adolescence, sexuality, or class.

Denotation and Connotation:

- **Denotation:** This painting depicts a young girl who is half covered with a curtain; the center of the composition is the fragment of revelation.
- The connotations are rich. There are also connotations of waiting.

Arbitrariness of the Sign:

- The meaning of the curtain as a metaphor for transition is not inherent in the curtain but depends on the culture. The meaning of the curtain can also be different in other cultures because the exposure of the girl can be attached with many meanings.

- The posture of the girl, the way she looks, and the overlay of the space in the picture can be culturally interpreted, which just testifies the idea of arbitrariness of the sign, as presented by Saussure.

Ideology and Myth:

- The painting by Menon is laced with the ideology of myth of the feminine, with respect to waiting and transformation. The picture behind the curtain of the girl is both a reality experience and a mythical experience, the concept of coming of age that is determined by societal norms, privacy, and social scrutiny.
- The image is an illusion as well as the interrogation of the role of women in society/home space. The notion of the curtain is the social segregation of women and the subject matter even in a small area.

Findings of the study

The critical findings portray that female Indian artists play a crucial role to challenge and redefine social realities by their art which is briefly presented in a tabular form:

| Aspect | Arpita Singh | Anjolie Ela Menon | Similarities |
|----------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Figurative Approach | Veiled and broken bodies. | Distant and ghostlike persons. | They both make use of figurative art which is emotional |
| Narrative Style | Visual storytelling | Personal storytelling | Write narrative-based work |
| Symbolism & Semiotics | Guns, maps, flowers, scripts, toys | Birds, windows, scars, costumes to construct trans-versal significances | Express more social messages |
| Color Palette | Dark, and at other times, glaring, pinks, reds, blues | Tones that are of earthly, tones of dim-brown, rust, orchard | They use four moods and emotions in contrast palette |
| Inspiration of Traditional forms | Minor painting, folklore art | Symbolism, Indian miniatures | Both integrate modern art with the traditional Indian art |
| Textual elements | Frequently | Almost never but contributes symbolic richness of text | Symbols having a deeper meaning, please us to solve their ancient tales |

Table 1. Individual Findings

| Aspect | Arpita Singh | Anjolie Ela Menon |
|-----------------------|--|---|
| Core Themes | Housewifery, brutality, displacement. | Motherhood, weakness, mythology, and emotional introspection. |
| Female Representation | Strong women in the world of political anarchy, overlapped with symbols. | Suffering and dignified, Madonna-like figures. |
| Visual Style | Crowded, Childlike elements | Elongated personalities, rooted in history, in thoughtful situations. |
| Social Critique | Links home life to wars | Challenges patriarchy through the depth of psychology and violence. |

Table 2. Similarities in Artistic Style

Indian women artists play an important role in disrupting unjust society and being patriarchal through the emphasis on gender prejudice, violence, sexuality, and body images. The art of these women makes women strong and contributes to the equality of gender. The women artists rely on their artistic work to re-appropriate and redefine womanhood and the problems pertaining to womanhood and identity. The works of these female artists provide a new outlook and contribute to the escape of the outdated stereotypes. Although the female artists have their contribution and distinct artistic practices, they still struggle to be recognized and have access in a male dominated art world. The art developed by these women is not only making the attention paid to these challenges but also opposing and criticizing them.

CONCLUSION

The female Indian artists have been the change-makers and have transformed our social perceptions through their art works. The women artists have not been afraid to address matters relating to gender, identity, social justice, and have moved beyond patriarchal ideologies and have given voice to

those who have long been overlooked. Women artists have depicted personal experiences, social and political issues and through various forms of art have developed interesting stories, which are pertinent in the present-day India. Although these women artists had to endure numerous challenges surviving in a world full of male domination throughout centuries, they have been fearless, pushing the boundaries of art and making the society more inclusive through their influential pieces of art, which are not merely focused on putting social problems into the limelight, but a shift in the current state of Indian art and culture.

REFERENCES

- [1] Chowdhury, A. (2024). Use of Figure as the Language of Artistic Expression: An Analysis Based on Indian Female Artists' Artworks. *Journal of South Asian Exchanges*, 1. v1n218.pdf (saexchanges.com)
- [2] Rajak, B. K. Portrayal of Women in Indian Cinema Then & Now. *Words in Motion: The Power of Media and Arts*, 53. Words-in-Motion.pdf (aaft-university2025.s3.ap-south-1.amazonaws.com)
- [3] Morphy, H. (2009). Art as a mode of action: some problems with Gell's art and agency. *Journal of material culture*, 14(1), 5-27. 01 Morphy 100006F (researchgate.net)
- [4] Campt, T. M. (2023). *A Black gaze: Artists changing how we see*. Mit Press. racar_47_2_zz_a_cosbertmiller.pdf (racar-racar.com)
- [5] Khanwalkar, S. (2014). Contemporary Indian Art and the 'Semiotic Eye': Issues and Perspectives. *IIM Kozhikode Society & Management Review*, 3(1), 75-80. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2277975214520902>
- [6] Anwar, Z. (2023). *Feminist visual semiotic analysis of protest art at Aurat March in Pakistan* (Doctoral dissertation, Memorial University of Newfoundland). content (scholaris.ca)
- [7] Kaur, H., & Nadeem, U. (2024). World Woman Studies Conference-VII. *New Delhi, India*.
- [8] Microsoft Word - 1_KAPAK (researchgate.net)
- [9] Chowdhury, A. (2024). Use of Figure as the Language of Artistic Expression: An Analysis Based on Indian Female Artists' Artworks. *Journal of South Asian Exchanges*, 1. <https://saexchanges.com/v1n2/v1n218.pdf>
- [10] Singh, S. K. (2020). Visual Rhetoric in Contemporary Mithila Painting. *SHWETA SHARDUL*, 3.
- [11] <https://www.mbmc.edu.np/uploads/medias/ShwetaShardulaMultidisciplinaryJournalVolXVII-2020.pdf#page=8>
- [12] Alharbi, A. S. (2023). Socio-cultural perspectives on color semantics: A semiotic analysis of color symbolism in English and Arabic. *International Journal of Society, Culture & Language*, 11(3), 146-158.
- [13] https://www.ijscel.com/article_707499_9639047fcff176a8014622647cc5e91a.pdf