Approach
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Through the ages the woman form has been variously depicted by artists in Indian art. The female body has always been given primary importance in Indian art and literature. It is interesting to observe how the female form has evolved in visual arts from the earliest times to the present.

The work of artists in India has often been a reflection of the socio-religious construct patronized by kings and rulers. There has been tremendous development in the artistic tradition, yet there has been anonymity of the artist. We do not know as to who were the artists who created art in the past. The question arises as to ‘Did women also paint?’ There is not much information available about women artists in the past. However, some mythological and literary references are available, yet nothing substantial is found. However, in the Mughal period we do come across names of some women painters¹. Though examples do surface now and then, yet a continuous evolvement of the women painters in the past has not come across to us. Even though we do not know much about the female artists from the mainstream art but in the world of folk and tribal art their presence is marked by the amount of work produced and is still being done. Despite the fact that women were painting, the women artist had not surfaced. Their presence was only silently felt.

When do we witness the emergence of women artists in Indian art?

The social, economic and cultural limitations faced by women for centuries was beginning to change by the nineteenth century. The opening of Industrial schools to impart training in the traditional crafts was started by the British. Most of the students who learnt the craft techniques did not belong to the families of traditional craftsmen. We don’t come across the name of any women taking training in these schools. However at the same time, women were painting as a hobby basically to amuse themselves. They had still not

taken up art as a vocation. The socio-political changes during the freedom movement were encouraging for women and helped them to avenue out into various areas earlier were considered as male domains. The appearance of Amrita Sher-Gil (1913-41) in India in the mid 1930’s categorically changed the role of women in art. Her contribution to the development of modern Indian painting is very well known. She became the single largest role model for the women artists of India. Though her contribution has been immense as a woman artist, yet it was a singular event in the pre-Independence era of Indian art. Even after about thirty years of her death, we do not hear about any other significant woman artist who achieved success like her. It is observed that even though there were some women who studied art in Calcutta or Bombay did not continue to work professionally in the field of art. Actually, it was only around the early 1960’s that we see some serious work being done by some women artists. A large number of artists went abroad and came into contact with modern trends in European as well as American Art. This was also the time when more and more women started enrolling themselves in art colleges and we have the names of several women painters, sculptors and graphic artists working professionally in the field of art. This is an interesting shift in Contemporary Indian art. Of these some also went abroad for specialization in their respective mediums. Pioneers among them are Devayani Krishna, a painter, Pilloo Pochkhanawala, a sculptor, Meera Mukherjee, a noted sculptor trained in Calcutta and Germany, Nasreen Mohamedi, an abstract painter who studied painting at St. Martin’s College of Art, London, Amina Ahmed Kar, a painter who studied at Calcutta and Art history at Ecole Du Louvre. Anjole Ela Menon, a painter who was trained in fresco technique at Ecole des Beaux Arts, Paris. Naina Dalal and Anupam Sud explored print making techniques. Others, besides establishing themselves as artists, ventured into teaching art, such as Lalita Lajmi and Suruchi Chand who were associated with the art department at the University of California, Berkeley in 1979. Other prominent names like Arpita Singh, Gogi Saroj Pal, Nalini Malini, Nilima Sheikh, Latika Katt, and
Arpana Caur drew national attention to the fact that women had taken in the world of art.

Recently, a lot is being written about these artists and their work in art journals, magazines and catalogues. Books have also been published on their works. They are exhibiting their works at the national and international platforms. These artists cover a plethora of themes in their creations. It is observed that they are looking at life from their own independent perspective and responding creatively to their situations. This development is quite significant as woman has established herself as a freethinking individual who works for her own identity, without any constraints, compulsions or inhibitions.

The development of this approach is quite interesting and makes one wonder what she thinks about herself as a woman and how visually she projects that ‘self’ in her art. Moreover, how women artists perceive women in general and what image they create of her in their respective mediums. To explore the idea how a woman artist reflects on the image of woman in art I have chosen this topic. A general survey of art reveals that both male and female artists have worked on the theme of woman quite extensively. For the purpose of my research thesis, it would be too ambitious a project to cover the works of all the artists who have handled this particular theme. Keeping this in view, I am restricting my study to the works of ten contemporary women artists only and have identified them keeping in mind the variations in their background and also their medium of expression as they are painters, sculptors and also graphic artists.

A case study of these ten contemporary women artists of India mentioned as per chronological order has been undertaken. The names of these artists are as follows:

1. Arpita Singh - 1937
2. Anjolie Ela Menon - 1940
3. Madhvi Parekh - 1941
4. Anupam Sud - 1944
5. Gogi Saroj Pal - 1945
6. Nilima Sheikh - 1945
7. Mrinalini Mukherjee - 1949
8. Arpana Caur - 1954
10. Kanchan Chander - 1957

Much attention in art is always given to the art movements, but the area of my study relates to the image of woman and the approach of representing the image in the works of these ten contemporary women artists chosen for the study. This analytical study is in no way a compilation of the feminist art, (per se’ as the case maybe in feminist literature) as these artists have voiced not only issues which concern them as women, but those issues as well which are contemporary to their times. During personal interaction with all of them, one thing which they all emphatically mentioned was their dislike at being categorized as women artists. They felt that they would like to be identified as artists (as we use the word actor for both the genders) instead of being categorized on the basis of their gender.

They are all pioneers in their respective fields bringing professionalism and feminine charm with their creative process. Delving deep into the woman theme and narrative in their creative process, projecting an array of woman images in their respective works they have depicted the image of woman, not only to articulate womanhood, femininity, but in social, economic and political context as well, touching upon the subjectivity of the woman as a whole.

The female image presented by these artists is not only the result of their own personal perception about women, but they also take into consideration how others view or perceive the woman. Traditionally, Indian ideals of female form have always stressed upon the concept of beauty. The social and economic factors have also played a very important role for influencing the projection of image of women in the visual and literary arts of Indian subcontinent. Thereby women in general and women artists in particular to
reassess their individuality in art in contemporary times, acting both as a witness and as agents of change, with the changing times.

The change in this representation of form is very recent, with change happening over the last three to four decades. A lot of serious efforts on part of film makers, artists, writers have been endeavoring at re-claiming the female body. In contrast to the earlier situation in traditional arts where not much substantial information is available regarding the women artists, a large number of women painters are working presently. Actually certain names are available from the 19th century and the early 20th century of women artists who were seriously pursuing art and a large number of women artists are working professionally since the 1950’s onwards.

The female form has been presented in a conceptually idealized way with more emphasis on her physicality and the feminine charm in the traditional Indian art. However, in the contemporary times the perception about the female form has taken a major shift and does not solely concern the physical appearance. The woman is perceived not just as a goddess or an Apsara, a beloved, mother, but as someone who is independent, professional, outgoing and having her own perceptions about life and the times in which she lives. The form, the image moves away from the fixed roles of women as described in the literary works and in the traditional arts.

In the 20th century India, the traditional views are modified and the constraints put on the women in general are being ignored and women artists come out strongly to project their own ideas differently from those of their male counterparts. A considerable interest in representing the female form is seen in the works of many women artists. The first serious effort that had a considerable impact on the visual representation of woman was observed in the works of the legendary artist Amrita Sher-Gil, who through her works pioneered an attempt to approach the body, especially the female body more subjectively. Her attempt to investigate the female body differently inspired many later women artists of India. Following in her foot steps and taking
inspiration from her work, many women artists came to the fore front and tried to subvert the social codes and endeavoured to re-invent the modes of representation of the female body. Through this study I have tried to put on records the various concerns of the artists and the images created in the process.

This dissertation has been divided into five chapters. In the first chapter an overview about the visual representation of woman in Traditional Indian art is discussed. An attempt to understand the reasons for the projection of the image of woman as seen in the traditional Indian art is explored. In the second chapter the social-economic factors instrumental in defining the role and status of Indian women from the Vedic period till the twentieth century are examined. These factors are very important in determining the image of woman in Indian art for centuries. The third chapter studies the emergence of women painters in traditional Indian art and examines the reasons for their subsequent evolvement as independent artists in the Post-Independent era.

In the fourth chapter an overview of the works and the creative processes of the ten women artists taken in the case study has been done. Their approach to the image of woman is investigated covering more than three decades of the works of these artists. The work of each of this artist is studied individually in a chronological order. The fifth chapter involves an analysis of the style and the respective approaches of all these artists and a comparative study of the image of woman as projected in their art is investigated.

The study covers the period of Post-independence era, when a significant number of women artist have actively involved themselves in the art field. This research is not aimed at a survey of contemporary women artists of India, for there are hundreds of highly gifted and talented women artists in India and it was not possible to cover all those here.

The thrust area of the research is the interpretation of the image and the approach to the form of woman in the works of these ten artists chosen for the case study. These women artists do not belong to any single group or
movement, but stand apart as individuals who in their own right have had a sphere of influence on the Indian art scene. Their art is also a reflection of their deepest emotions and their cultural heritage. The common factor, which is the fundamental issue of my study, is the ways they approach ‘Woman Form’.

All these artists are well established now and have been working passionately in their creative areas for more than forty years and have a vast repertory of work. As the analysis of the study is restricted towards the development and the representation of the woman form, the selection of the works is restricted to only those works which best emulate the stylistic development of the artists in relevance to the theme of the thesis. Each artist has her own individual style developed through decades of work in their field and this has made my job challenging and at the same time interesting to do a comparative study of the creative processes even when they are working towards the same theme.

All of them have been working consistently for the last many decades making a mark for themselves at the national and international art. Interestingly, most of them started painting professionally by the late 1960’s. Their creative period coincides with the time when the feminist movements picked momentum not only in the West, but in India as well. However, the aim of the research in not to assimilate or depict the feminist art, but to understand how these artists have articulated and approached the narrative of the woman image in their art. The research attempts to cover a range of various sensibilities and ideas of these artists, which have prevailed in their art during the last few decades.

The methodology applied for the research involves personal interviews and interaction with these ten artists preferably in their studios or at their work place. Detailed information about the artists’ life, education, and family life is sought and collected from various sources: both primary and secondary. Visits to various galleries and museums within the country were undertaken. A study
and collection of various catalogues of their exhibitions was also carried out. The original works have been photo documented by me personally.

Despite their individual identities and ideologies, the exploration of the form and the interest in depiction of the feminine narrative in their art is common.

The works of these artists are potent, compelling with engaging narratives of stories told and re-told. They have introspected their experiences, ideas and thoughts and in this process have been able to re-discover and re-invent their imagery.