



SIGNATURES OF THE COLLECTIVE SELF: A STUDY OF SELECT CONTEMPORARY SOUTH INDIAN WOMEN ARTISTS

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Abstract

This study reclaims the status of women artists of South India by a process of recovery and inclusion. The aspect of their marginalisation from mainstream art and subsequent disappearance from the annals of art history has been examined. Further, the reasons for this disappearance are investigated in terms of the overarching notion of gender, embedded in social and cultural parameters. The article locates the manner in which these women artists are affected by familial, institutional and social systems and explores the experiences of the women artists in terms of their multiple roles. It can lead to an understanding of the negotiated spaces of private and public domains, which form the paradigms of art practice and are crucial to the expression of women artists.

Though Indian Art has grown in international stature and has gained a global visibility today, women artists remain underrepresented in many areas such as major curated shows, international expositions, award of international, national and regional prizes and scholarships. At the national level, South India continues to register minimally in the mainstream of modern Indian art. The research article seeks to register the presence of women artists in South India from the twentieth century and their contribution. It essentially gains insights into the roles played out by the artists and their status not only in terms of gender but also culture and identity and examines the transformation achieved by women artists in South India over the years and the position they occupy.

This study reclaims the status of women artists of South India by a process of recovery and inclusion. The aspect of their marginalisation from mainstream art and subsequent disappearance from the annals of art history has been examined. Further, the reasons for this disappearance are investigated in terms of the overarching notion of gender, embedded in social and cultural parameters. The article locates the manner in which these women artists are affected by familial, institutional and social systems and explores the experiences of the women artists in terms of their multiple roles. It can lead to an understanding of the negotiated spaces of private and public domains, which form the paradigms of art practice and are crucial to the expression of women artists.

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The word 'artist' appears gendered in art history always alluding to the male and the prefix woman therefore, was accorded to the few who managed to mark their presence. The art done by women has been repositioned by not just women and feminists, but also by their male counterparts. Women artists in South India use varied approaches in order to persist in elitist art circles and also within the framework of the larger patriarchal societal structures. These women artists often express in their work an appraisal of the leading concerns of inequity, disparity, and subjugation that all women confront on a daily basis. This situation is worsened in India by issues of caste and class. The transition between different spaces, such as rural and urban, led to an interchangeable state of alienation and autonomy for the woman artist. The expressions of these women artists have come into view as potent and vital signs in the present-day art scenario.

The crux of this study is to recognise within the framework of gender that the women artists of South India have been neglected. The scope of the study addresses this lacuna and fulfils it through the identification, recovery and registering of



some of these artists as an initial step to enhance the opportunities for future research endeavours. The framework of gender inclusion is also ensured by not determining the standing or position of an artist in particular but locating the overall status of women artists of south India denying hierarchic division.

Women's art can be traced from the colonial beginnings to the era of independence in the 1940's and 1950's. The artists of the initial era of post-colonialism and independence saw themselves within patriarchal frames and a cultural and social milieu which disallowed art practice on grounds of loss of femininity and chastity. Their art however shows a subtle reorientation in terms of negating the voyeuristic gaze. In the next generation, the artists were driven into a search for a selfhood on an equitable basis. In the art of post-independent India of the 1960s and 1970s the focus is on the politics of gender, culture and feminism. In South Indian art, from this period on art gained momentum, wherein a few artists refused to play out typecast gender roles. This however did not break all gender barriers and the epoch of transition was made possible through patriarchal benevolence and institutionalised structures. The individuality of artists did gain merit at this juncture. The next phase of artistic activity shows the transition from a search for a collective identity to that for an individual one, initiated in the 1970s and driven forward in the 1980s by a few women artists. They began to experiment and innovate not only through their art but also through questions directed towards discriminatory practices. This also ensured that the culture of professionalism and work ethics became gender inclusive. This impetus given by subaltern and feminist studies the world over had its impact in the Indian context too. Finally art from the 1990s onwards examines the establishing of individual identities by the women artists on their own terms. These artists continue their journey towards finding authenticity of expressions through their own individual experiences in the world of commodification and fragmentation.

The study is based on interviews and field work carried out between 2007 and 2011 for doctoral research, in the various prominent centres of art activity of the four south Indian states. The criteria for selection of nearly a hundred women artists from South India over a fifty year period ranging from the 1940's to the 1990's remained as open and flexible as possible. As a common and comprehensive frame, artists who are active practitioners at a given period are included. For this, artists' directories and other published material including books, articles in magazines, newspapers provided a generic basis. At this juncture I would like to point out that more than two thirds of the women artists who have been included in this study have found hardly a mention in documentation of any kind. Interviews and interactions with artists and members of artists' families yielded maximum knowledge which recovered artists who had faded into the interstices of documented art history. Since, artists in the initial period were hardly documented; sources had to be gleaned through interviews to compensate the paucity of available written material.

The study records that, women artists in South India began, even during the colonial and nationalist periods, to negotiate their gender roles and spaces, though at that stage it was through the conformist mode of resilience. British intervention ushered an era of education and this was gradually extended to women in varied fields including art. This created a gentle, passive influx of art practitioners who hardly gained a space for themselves or their art. Their location was seen only in terms of a benevolent supporter, usually a male relative. They were seen only within the domestic sphere, where concerns of marriage and family staked its claim. At this juncture I would like to introduce a few of the women artists in order to reiterate the fact that these women continued their art practice is, in itself a strong statement, of not just their passion and commitment to art, but also their gendered stance as women creating viable spaces for themselves as they were contained by the framework of family and class connotations.

A lone artist hailing from Kerala's elite background such as Mangala Bai Thampuratty, Ravi Varma's sister, took an initial step to nurture her talent but conformed to paradigms set by the rigid upper-class community to which she belonged. While Ravi Varma was readily accorded an iconic position as genius artist, Mangala Bai who actively practiced art right up to the age of 84, was denied the same privilege. Though her work had hardly been recognized in her time, she is today acknowledged as an artist in her own right.

The art of Andhra Pradesh in the 1920s had a nationalistic, Bengali affiliation in which the male artist Damerla Rama Rao was a leading figure. Two young women Butchi Krishnamma and Damerla Satyavani, the sister and the widow of Damerla Rama Rao continued his work and created paintings which recall the Bengal style with its romantic, nationalist idiom. Finally I would like to draw attention to two women who emerged from the Government College of Fine Arts in Madras as it was called then, which was under the stewardship of D.P. Roy Chowdhury- Kamala Das Gupta and Rama Bai Paniker. Kamala Das Gupta and Rama Bai Paniker gained recognition only by way of association, when they married fellow artists who rose to eminence. The two women artists entered family structures and set aside their art practice willingly in order to support their spouses. The next two slides show the works of women artists from this era in varied locations using common themes and with the stylistic semblances which bring them together.



Independent India awoke from the reverie of freedom only to realise the need to locate its own identity as a new nation. The next time period saw women artists who were starting to seek their positions within their own regional locations in South India. Rural and folk traditions which had been subsumed within national ideology were taken into their own context and reclaimed. The ideas of the western world and prevalent artistic trends of modernism became inspirational sources, which could be unabashedly intertwined with regional influences. This was the era of an overwhelming quest for identity, not just at the collective, but also individual levels.

Here the role of the Government College of Fine Arts in Madras, under the charismatic principalship of KCS Paniker, is pivotal. Paniker's vision of an artists' commune also came to fruition as the Cholamandal Artists' Village which continues till today as a hub of art activity. The 1960s saw the emergence of a few women under the guidance of Paniker as artists of merit like Rani Nanjappa née Pooviah, T.K. Padmini, Anila Jacob née Thomas and Arnawaz Vasudev née Driver whose artistic oeuvre will be briefly dwelt upon.

Rani Pooviah: Rani Pooviah's life and art reflect both her 'Indian-ness' and her modernist inclination. Her works combine the traditional love of line through the source of kolams with the modern rhythm of the abstracted form and composition. **T.K. Padmini:** To interpret the human figure as a text through the prism of nature was the forte of artist T.K. Padmini. The verdant locale of Kerala embedded itself through childhood memories in almost all of her expressionistic and symbolic paintings. T.K. Padmini brought alive the intimacies of a home environment which were denied a place in art practice and where subjective representation was decried, through her feminine archetypes who reveal myriad emotions.

Anila Jacob: Anila Jacob's abstracted sculptural forms are at once evocative and dynamic, derived from an instinctive use of material. Her versatility in using wood, stone, copper and granite, began as a student and continues even today after her nearly two decade long hiatus.

Arnawaz Vasudev: Arnawaz Vasudev rendered simple drawings and wash paintings in ink which evolved from iconic and fantastic imagery, taking it forward to the realm of the decorative. Arnawaz Vasudev's paintings and drawings combine her linear sensibility, her love of the mythical with a certain innocence of approach using simple forms.

In Andhra Pradesh, Hyderabad ushered in a few commendable practitioners of art like Fatima Ahmed, Siddiqua Bilgrami and Kavita Deuskar. Kavita Deuskar's extraordinary empathy for the people who inhabit our everyday world is seen in almost all her depictions, especially of women with their exaggerated limbs on sunburnt, stocky bodies showing the struggle and industry of the toiling folk. The 1970s saw the appearance of artists who gained eminence such as Mumtaz Ali who worked in the Cholamandal artists Village as a printmaker for a brief period, Premalatha Seshadri who works and resides in Chennai currently and Rekha Rao who began her stint in Mumbai and now works in Bengaluru. A few individual artists like Rukmini Varma and Uma Varma worked intermittently. Rukmini Varma's works reflect personal claims to the Ravi Varma tradition mediated through appropriations while Uma Varma worked briefly as the inheritor of a long lineage of artistic legacies from the west, India and her own region.

The celebration of pluralist, individualist claims of society became a global reality in the 1970s and 1980s. The post-modernist discourses on deconstruction, feminist and subaltern studies impacted itself throughout the world. In India, the reverberations of globalisation and consumerism made its appearance and the women artists struggled to find a foothold at this time in order to establish themselves on their own terms. The following chronological framework focuses on women artists who experimented freely and drew upon personal experiences to re-enact their own histories thus shattering the objective approach as being the only mode of expression in art. This also created a pluralist approach to styles, a flux in terms of position and location both in the personal and collective spheres. The works of many women artists shows the transition from a search for a collective identity to that for an individual one. Some artists like Pushpamala N., Radhika Vaidyanathan, Rathi Devi, Sheela Gowda, Smitha Cariappa, Surekha K.B. and Vasudha Thozhur have pushed the boundaries of art even further, though only a few amongst them have gained international and national recognition, while yet others languish on the fringes and more struggle to find a foothold in the art world even today.

The divide between art practice and design interventions has blurred considerably in today's visual culture. Techno-savvy new age artists have emerged after the 1980s. Popular art, new media and artisanal practices intermingle freely in the artistic expressions of contemporary artists. This period has been earmarked by an implosion of sorts; there has been an effort to question differences and to break preconceived notions not only of gender but of other power structures such as of religion, caste, market and economy. Women artists at this point moved away from the periphery towards visibility and establishment but struggled to disallow the creation of new stereotypes or power centres which continued to privilege one over the other.



Some artists are socially committed to bringing in changes not for themselves but for society at large. They are currently an urban phenomenon but there are the signs of emerging artists from rural spaces creating an alternative location.

Contemporary Indian art in certain quarters has come into its own with women being at the forefront of artistic innovation. Gender equity and freedom of movement from one space to another, such as geographic, socio-cultural and stylistic spaces, has given birth to the new age woman artist. She no longer seeks validation through her femininity, through her gender or social and cultural markers. This being the ideal is quite apparent, as the negotiable space has originated at the elitist level of art practice and has remained isolated within this paradigm. It has not percolated fully into the sphere of mass visual culture or every day art and design. The craftspersons, especially women live, marginalised, impoverished lives in affirmation of hierarchic structures in society. However, this being said, the scope for an understanding of the art of women, which began with elite art practice, is now gaining ground in several spheres. There is a respect, minimal and grudging in some spaces, accorded without relegating woman's art to the realm of mass production, 'hobby' work of housewives and thereby denying it due consideration. This study seeks to record women artists from the entire southern region of India over a span of more than fifty years and also brings to light for the first time some artists and works which have never been included in any documented source making a meaningful and inclusive start to the renegotiation of art history. It is an initiative to trace the multiple roles the south Indian women artists have donned as wives, mothers, academicians and feminists among many others as they have risen up to challenges within their individual parameters. Some artists have brought in radical changes with others taking up the parochial model. The study has yielded a body of work which boldly questions stratified notions of gender and of the woman's identity as individual and yet within a collective ideology. It reveals through the works of the women artists that they often had an unconscious feminine sensibility as they responded to their locations and situations. The women artists used subject matter which affected them as individuals and as responses to social causes.

Despite an increase in the number of women artists in art practice, at the grass roots level, they are still a distinct minority in terms of museum showings, major exhibitions, national awards and international auctions. The visible invisibility of the women artists of South India in the modern times is a result of the social imbalance of structures in terms of gender. Patriarchal constructs conform till date to a hierarchy wherein power structures remain unshaken. Women artists are judged in art circles not only in terms of their work but also their lives and their commitment to art. However, art, which has been perceived as a male bastion, has been successfully stormed by women artists. Sustained efforts are nevertheless required to reclaim artisanal practices and the works of many artists from across divisions need to find a place in social consciousness. Research endeavours in future can be designed towards such enquiries. This can pave the way towards emancipation from stratification, which can lead to a more humanistic approach within the artists' world, carrying it forward, creating new and inclusive histories of art.

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