



Reflections of Femininity: Depiction of Women in Bengali Patachitra and Rajasthani Miniature Painting – A Comparative Perspective

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ABSTRACT

In a comparative analysis of female depictions in Bengali Patachitra and Rajasthani miniatures, we see that both architectures depict women in the light of their own traditions and cultures. Rural Patachitras of Bengal generally depict women in religious myths, goddess-tales and folk tales; whereas Rajasthani miniatures depict educated royal traditions, mythological love stories and royal life. In the light of feminist visual theory, it can be seen that the representation of women in traditional art is often male-centered. The role of old and new symbols is important in iconographic analysis (e.g. Goddess Durga holding a weapon, carrying a lion). When considered from a colonial perspective, it is seen that social and secular issues entered the canvas during the colonial period. At the same time, the depiction of women in a nationalist context also reflects the imagination of the nascent state. In short, this theoretical foundation will be helpful in understanding gender perspectives and the impact of historical change.

Portrayal of women in Bengali Patachitra

Image 1(Name- Single Panel Patachitra of Goddess Durga with Family 2019,Source- Google Arts & Culture)



The main feature of women in Bengali Patachitra is the representation of goddess-tales and folk tales. In the context of Durga Puja, Patuas paint the myths of Goddess Durga and the images of related gods and goddesses. For example, the painters of Patua para in Pingla portray Durga in three roles: a loving mother, a beloved daughter, and a loving wife. In the image, Lakshmi is placed on the left with her wealth and Saraswati is placed on the right with her wealth. The mind shows this emotion of motherhood beyond the helplessness of the goddess-image. In addition, folktales or social events are also depicted in patachitras. As a historical example, the Elokeshi massacre of 1873 has been re-enacted in the form of patachitras (Ghosh, S). While ancient patachitras depicted mythological characters of women, modern patachitras also portray women as active citizens.

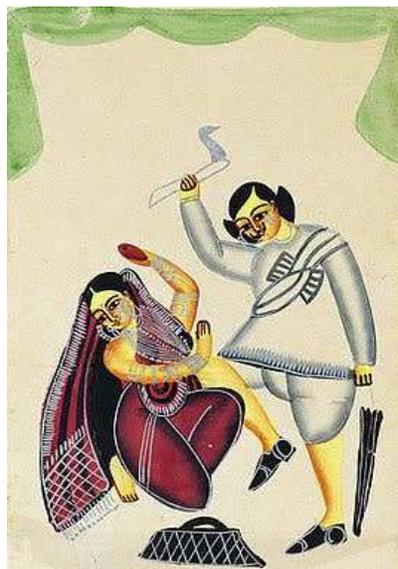


Image 2(Name- Scene of Nabin killing Elokeshi | Watercolour on paper, Source- EMAMI Art)



For example, Swarna Chitrakar has used patachitras to spread social messages on COVID-19 awareness. In comparison, Kalam Patua has brought the voices of modern women to the canvas, her portrayal of “Nirbhaya” is one such example that highlights the justice of sexual violence and the agency of women. In Bengali Patachitra, the characters of women are also unfairly judged through the spoken stories of the artist. In calligraphy, the old Patuas usually showed women as 'loving Grihalakshmi' or 'vulgar wife', but contemporary Patuas also express the idea of justice by highlighting the deprivation of women in stories like Elokeshi or Nibarya. Patuas are enthusiastic about singing, playing and painting on social and women's rights issues in addition to religious stories, and as a result, the depiction of women as a social issue can also be observed.

Depiction of women in Rajasthani miniatures

Rajasthani miniatures (Rajput miniatures) are a form of royal art that depicts epics, royal families, and love stories from Hindu mythology. Women are often depicted in religious or royal contexts. The best-known example is the Radha-Krishna love story, which is particularly depicted in the Kishangarh style. Nihal Chand's works depict Bani Thani as Radha and Shawanta Singh as Krishna. These works are considered "the best of Rajput miniatures". Bani Thani's paintings, which are emblematic of the Kishangarh style, depict an idealized female body with a long neck, takiyya eyes, and a pointed nose and facial features (Swabhi Dixit et al. 2024). The classical "heroine-character" concept has also had a strong influence on Rajasthani art. The behavior of various lovers or heroines (such as Vasaka-Sajjika, Shatvika Nayika) is seen in the paintings. For example, in the romantic love story of Krishna-Radha, the different emotions (delight, pain, expectation) of Radha-Gopis are depicted. In terms of beauty and attraction, Rajasthani paintings are noble: the queen or women are shown as symbols of divine love or royal status through their adornment (jewelry, Aaraisha saree) and facial expressions. The use of bright red, gold, green colors is also common, which indicates abundance and brotherhood. Another major theme of Rajasthani miniatures is the royal court and warrior life.

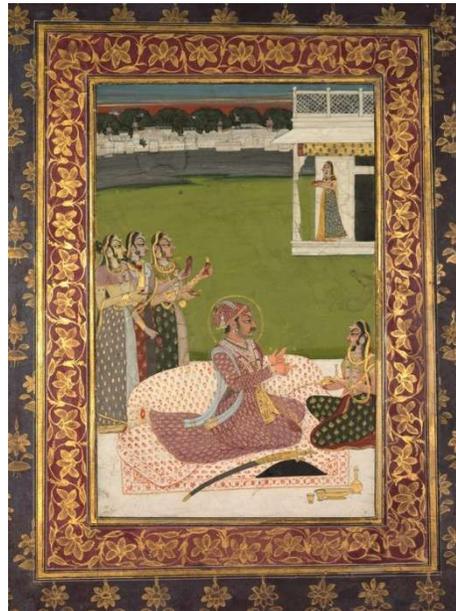


Image 3 (Name- Portrait of Maharaja Savant Singh with Bani Thani,Source-Wikimedia)

Several paintings show the Rajput king with his wife or concubine in the palace or garden. For example, Nihal Chand's "**Portrait of Maharaja Savant Singh with Bani Thani**" shows the king and his bride together. In addition, women are also found in court scenes from various Rajasthani states such as Bikana, Kota-Bundi, etc. (where women portray princesses or members of the royal court). Overall, the spiritual ideals of Radha and other goddesses and the divine attributes of royal women play a major role in the depiction of women in Rajasthani miniatures.

Mention of specific artists and their work

Swarna Chitrakar: Swarna Chitrakar, a resident of Pingla (Naya Gram) in West Bengal, is a renowned representative of the Patachitra artist. She has inherited the tradition from her father and continues the form of telling the story of chariots through Patachitra and songs. Swarna has used her Patachitra and songs to spread awareness about the pandemic Covid-19. She has also been awarded for her work of international standard.

Kalam Patua: Kalam works on the subject of sexual life of mature women and women's liberation. In her films, modern women are establishing their own voice and rights. For example, she has also depicted the famous "Nirbhaya" rape case in India, where women are shown as heroines of justice. Although the calligraphy follows the tradition of Patua, her subject matter is very contemporary and feminist in perspective.



Nihal Chand: Nihal Chand was the royal painter of Kishangarh from 1710 to 1782. He portrayed the blonde Banib Thani and Shawanta Singha as Radha. Nishanik set the standard of beauty in Kishangarh's own style: his female figures are characterized by a narrow nose, long neck, and slanted eyes. According to Britannica, Banib Thani may have been his model, and Nihal Chand was the creator of the lovingly impersonal image in Rajput painting.

Rajesh Soni: Artist Rajesh Soni (born 1981) from Udaipur, Rajasthan is a modern miniaturist. He is a third-generation Mewar royal painter who transforms grey-tone photographs into miniatures by hand-painting them. He has gained international recognition after working for three decades since 2008. Rajesh and photographer Waso have collaborated on a series titled “Gauri Dancers”, which chronicles the lives of traditional Gauri dancers of Mewar. Rajesh’s work has reinvented the narrative of women in a contemporary way while maintaining the subtleties of old miniatures.

Comparative discussion

Some similarities and differences can be observed in the depiction of women in Bengali Patachitra and Rajasthani miniatures. Both genres represent the beauty, joy and sacrifice of women, but the style of expression is different. In Bengali Patachitra, women are depicted as 'goddesses' and as wives and children of society (such as Durga-mother of the family, Lakshmi and Saraswati-daughter), in which folklore and morality play a major role. In this, women are sometimes seen as loving household goddesses, sometimes as victims of social injustice. On the contrary, in Rajasthani miniatures, women are presented as the ideal image of Radha or a princess. Here, romantic themes of love and devotion (Radha-Krishna's abhisar, Banithani) and the bride-empress of the royal court series are discussed. The difference is also clear in terms of style: Bengali Patachitra is usually painted with simple strokes, bright natural colors and the entire scene is painted in a flat look like water; Rajasthani miniatures, on the other hand, use fine brushes, thick, bright colors, and often golden backdrops. For centuries, the Patachitra Nritanta has carried the spirit of the rural masses; Rajasthani miniatures are a blend of rural and palace traditions, with hints of Mughal and Basnadipta styles.

But there are similarities: both have preserved some traditions centered on women. For example, both recall the alluring form of women and the mantra of obedience – in Bengali patachitra, it is seen in the form of Durga-matrimony and Lakshmi's Sukhadita, in Rajasthani miniatures, it is seen in the loving sacrifice of Radha and the heroine characters. In the modern context, both genres carry a feminist message; just as Bengali patachitra has new interpretations of the social role of women, so too in modern versions of Rajasthani miniatures (such as scenes of ordinary women rather than images of kings). In

short, Bengali patachitra presents a multidimensional image of women through deification and social narratives, while Rajasthani miniatures present an embellished ideal of women through Radha-love and the royal family. In both cases, the evolution of female portraiture over time is noticeable.

Contemporary Context and the Reconstruction of Women

Today, Bengali patachitra also represents a social movement: many female artists have achieved self-reliance through patachitra painting. Over a hundred female members of the patuara group are working in the patachitra industry today. Just as the old-style patuara sang gossip songs, the new patuaras are conveying socio-political messages. For example, starting from patachitras related to Covid-19, “Nirbhaya” based on fair trial and works on LGBTQ issues show us the attempt to empower women through painting. Rajasthani miniatures have also seen a recent revival. For example, Udaipur-based artist Rajesh Soni has used modern technology (photography) to bring new life to old miniatures (Monsoon Malabar).



Image 4 &5 (Title- Gauri Dancers, Source- Monsoon Malabaar)

His series ‘Gauri Dancers’, created with the help of Waswo X. Waswo, showcases women’s traditional dance (Gauri) as well as their stories. In this way, modern artists are sculpting the everyday lives and cultural roles of traditional women. In both cases, a new generation of artists is creating new images of women while maintaining tradition. The rural Patuas of West Bengal are now promoting not only



mythological or educational stories, but also feminist and social values through pictures and songs. In the context of Rajasthani miniatures, modern painters are using the power of ancient styles to introduce recent thinking (such as showing women's traditional responsibilities in new frames). As a result, today's depiction of women in both styles is not only a reflection of the past, but also a field of self-identification and empowerment for contemporary women.

CONCLUSION

The representation of women in visual art is not merely an aesthetic or spiritual matter, but a cultural, social and political construct. The depiction of women in two different genres of art, Bengali Patachitra and Rajasthani miniature painting, essentially reflects two different perspectives—one folk and performative, the other courtly and aristocratic. Yet in both styles, femininity has become a central symbol, hidden within which are multi-layered analyses of gender, power and social status. In the case of Bengali Patachitra, the depiction of women ranges from goddesses (e.g. Durga, Kali, Manasa) to contemporary social stories (e.g. Nirbhaya movement, environmental conservation, anti-dowry messages). These paintings not only portray characters from the fantasy world, but also reflect the daily reality, suffering and resistance of women. In particular, artists like Swarna Chitrakar, Ramcharan Chitrakar or Kalam Patua portray the daily struggles of women in the style of folk tales and through performative songs, where women are not passive characters, but active creators of the narrative. This perspective makes women not just a subject of representation, but also creates a space for self-expression in their own experiences and language. On the other hand, women have long been depicted as a kind of 'visual object' in Rajasthani miniature paintings. The heroine's love, longing, beauty, or silent pain as Radha—all of which primarily fulfill the needs of the male gaze. In the paintings of Nihal Chand of the Kishangarh style, woman becomes a spiritual-romantic ideal, where Radha's face, gaze, and body are devoted to God's love but devoid of personality. Here, the fundamental difference between the agency of women in Bengali patachitra and the passivity of women in miniature—these two styles becomes clear. However, some common symbolic representations of femininity can be observed in both genres. For example, women's long hair, big eyes, curvy body lines, etc., have been repeatedly depicted, which creates a cultural mold of female beauty. Be it the glory of a goddess or the shame of a lover—both are essentially reflections of a kind of 'ideal woman' established on patriarchal standards. This is where the question of feminist art theory arises—are women's bodies and experiences visuals created only for men? Or can women redefine themselves through a change in the artist's perspective? Contemporary artists are showing new ways to answer this question. For example, Rajasthani artist Rajesh Soni, in his digital miniature paintings, takes women out of the enjoyable body and makes them a symbol of modern thought



and layered identity. Similarly, Bengali artists such as Rani Chitrakar and Karuna Chitrakar are shaping women's characters with social awareness—they have a voice, a protest, and a sense of belonging. This trend proves that both art forms are now moving from 'representation' to 'reclamation'—that is, not just portraying women, but also giving them their own consciousness and experience. Therefore, it can be said that both Bengali Patachitra and Rajasthani miniatures carry a kind of history, where the female character is sometimes sacred, sometimes lustful, sometimes oppressed, and sometimes protesting. Through the use of language and metaphors in this art form, we understand the change in society's view of women. On the one hand, the participation of folk voices and female artists in Bengali Patachitra has strengthened the female character, on the other hand, modern artists are adding new sensibilities to strengthen the visibility and voice of women despite the limitations of Rajasthani miniatures. In this way, the portrayal of women is not just art, but an ongoing social conversation—where the body, politics, culture, and experience are constantly creating new meanings. Future research needs a deeper analysis of this genre—especially analyzing how femininity is captured in depictions, collages, documentary art, and performance art from the perspective of women themselves. Because femininity is no longer just a matter of images—it is itself a political language.

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