



Emancipated Women in Madhubani Paintings

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Abstract

The Madurai painting, also known as Mithila painting, is an ancient art form originating from the Mithila region of Bihar, India, and are renowned worldwide for its vivid hues and complex detailing. Using feminist theory as a framework, this article examines how women are portrayed in Madurai art, and how the artform focuses on the idea of liberation. It will explore how Madurai painters confront or support gender stereotypes with their paintings, and how these illustrations mirror the progressing condition of women in present-day India. The article will analyze the impact of pictorial stereotypes of women in modern India on the representation of women in Madurai paintings, and how Madurai craftsmen navigate the conflict between conventional social norms and contemporary feminist perspectives. The findings will enhance our comprehension of how craftsmanship plays a role in shaping societal perceptions of women and adds to the ongoing discussion about gender equality and empowerment in India.

Keywords: Emancipation, Women empowerment, Madhubani paintings, Representation of women, Feminist perspective, Pictorial stereotypes, Gender roles.

A traditional folk art form originating from the Mithila region of Bihar, India is Madurai painting, also commonly known as Mithila painting. Madurai's paintings are done on various surfaces like paper, cloth, and walls using natural pigments and dyes, and intricate patterns, unique geometric designs, and vibrant colours are what define this art form. Dating back to ancient times, Madurai paintings have a long history. To signify auspicious occasions such as weddings, festivals, and other important events, women from the Pithily region would traditionally create these on their home walls.

The art form that originated in India has gained recognition as a distinct style over time. "In the past, the artwork was produced to honour the religious message and urged followers to do so" (Perera and Pathak). Themes portrayed in Madurai paintings include Hindu mythology, nature, everyday life and social and cultural issues. Madurai's paintings provide a distinctive viewpoint for anthropologists and ethnographers to analyze the cultural traditions, rituals, and convictions of the Pithily region. The paintings frequently portray which offer glimpses into regional cosmology, folklore, and native knowledge systems.

Women in the Mithila region are predominantly responsible for creating the area of Social and Gender Studies in Madurai paintings, and studying this art form offers insights into the

societal role of women, their artistic expression, and economic empowerment. Investigating women's agency and creativity in a traditional rural setting is made possible by it, while also providing an insight into gender dynamics, social hierarchies, and cultural norms of the region. Madurai's paintings frequently portray women as strong, independent, and empowered figures, with emancipated women being a common theme. They frequently portray women in positions that defy traditional gender norms and expectations, liberating themselves from societal limitations and embracing their identities and autonomy.

Madurai's paintings have a significant representation of women, with Sita, the central female character from the Hindu epic Ramayana, being a notable example. In Madurai paintings, Sita is commonly depicted as a courageous and independent figure who defends her beliefs and exhibits strength and resilience. She is represented as more than merely a passive victim or obedient wife—rather, she is a woman capable of making her own choices and asserting her independence. Through the bright colors, intricate designs, and rich symbolism of Madhubani paintings, women can communicate their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. This form of artistic expression allows women to voice their opinions, assert their identities, and share their perspectives on a variety of social, cultural, and personal issues. Always finding a way to express herself through images, Madhubani art is no exception. The children of widows, who were once forbidden to wear brightly coloured clothes, expresses themselves through Madhubani paintings, which were a means of empowering women and her art. Madhubani paintings act as a vehicle of empowerment, giving women agency and autonomy. By engaging in the process of creating art, women gain a sense of control and ownership over their work of art, which leads to a sense of empowerment in other aspects of their lives. It gives women the power to express their creativity, make decisions, and control their narrative, boosting their self-esteem and confidence.

Moreover, Madhubani paintings challenge traditional gender roles and stereotypes by portraying women engaging in diverse activities beyond the traditional roles of housewives and caretakers. This art form portrays women as bold, resilient, and confident individuals who stand up for their beliefs and make a name for themselves in society. Ganga Devi was one of the first artists whose work was recognized by the Madhubani community. Traditionally, Madhubani women from her community were responsible for creating murals in their homes but had no chance to exhibit their work or gain recognition outside her village. However, Ganga Devi has broken down these gender barriers and she has become a renowned artist whose work is exhibited and appreciated internationally. Her success as an artist challenged the idea that the role of women in the art world was confined to the subject rather than the artist. Her achievements paved the way for other female artists in her Madhubani community to pursue their artistic ambitions and be recognized for their work, thereby promoting the empowerment of women and contributing to the development of the tradition.

In figure 1 given below, the pregnant woman lying on the ground in Ganga Devi's painting "The Cycle of Life" (1983–85) can be seen through a lens, emphasizing themes of empowerment, embodiment, and the celebration of women's experiences. The pregnant woman, who is prominently and centrally placed, challenges the stereotype of women as passive objects. Her slouched position is a sign of comfort, confidence, and agency rather than one of weakness or submission. By showing a woman in a state of strength and

fulfillment, embracing her body and the life it nurtures, it subverts the male gaze. In the background, elements of nature are present, such as lush vegetation and flowers, symbolizing the interconnectedness of life and the natural world. These elements serve to enhance the overall theme of the painting, emphasizing the continuous cycle of birth, growth, and renewal.



Fig. 1: Ganga Devi. (1983-1985). The Cycle of Life.

Figure 2 given below, Sugata Kumari's painting "Women as Beast of Burden," skillfully depicts the stages of a woman's daily life: birth, childhood, marriage, emigration, expulsion from her husband's home, meditation, and death. The main theme of the painting is the idea that woman is always in charge of man, forever. "The third verse of the ninth chapter of Manu Smriti explains that women should be protected by the father in childhood, the husband in youth, and the son in old age. According to the above verse, in the time of Manu, the complete freedom of women is understood to have been imprisoned under the rule of men. Women are not allowed to lead a free social life in childhood, youth, or old age" (Adhikari, 2020). She will devote her entire life to caring for her parents, spouse, kids, and in-laws until she passes away. The women of the lower castes are seen working in the fields, but until they

have passed menopause, they are obligated to remain in their husbands' servitude or form familial relationships. The social system that keeps women in their homes has numerous basic reasons, but one of the biggest obstacles to women achieving freedom is a lack of knowledge. A well-dressed man riding an elephant in the painting's centre is contrasted with sobbing women's faces floating in the background. The painting's composition, which shows a single man riding an elephant across more than half of the canvas while several smaller canvases depict women engaged in various tasks, is meant to suggest that while women carry out a variety of duties, men are primarily in charge of earning money. Thus Sugata Kumari has done an excellent job of capturing the plight of women and the tenacity with which they bear the burdens placed upon them in "Women as Beast of Burden". It is a powerful work of art that demonstrates the resilience of the human spirit in the face of insurmountable challenges.



Fig. 2: Sugata Kumari. Women as Beast of Burden.

Figure 3, "Tearing the Veil Together," marks an attempt to depict traditional Mithila practices. "Together Tearing the Veil" takes a welcome diversion from the stereotypical portrayal of women as victims and by portraying this social shift in a nuanced manner in the painting. Several pairs of eyes can be seen through the curtains that form the background of the painting. A group of women are seen ripping open the middle curtain to reveal themselves, with floating eyes indicating that a woman must adhere to the "purdah" system and cover her face at all times. It is a throwback to a time when it did not exist. But, now they are gradually abandoning such archaic customs and trying to live their lives.



Fig. 3: Dr Rani Jha. (2011). Together Tearing the Veil.

Figure 4 titled "The Changing Woman," by Dr Rani Jha, depicts a woman in four segments. The artist has produced a piece that depicts women as frequently veiled and ignored in their communities. "In Changing Women Rani Jha uses women's dress to illustrate the change in societal norms over the last half century resulting in greater freedom for women"(In & Art, 2013). This picture displays how the woman gradually reveals herself as she moves from right to left. The woman's head is completely veiled at first, and her body is surrounded by children. There is another woman with her head bowed. They are not permitted to advance socially, and the painting further illustrates women's clothing. She covers her whole body, but takes off her clothes layer by layer on her panel until we finally see her face with her hair loose and only a child standing at her feet. The artist intends to convey how women are frequently veiled and hidden in the society and how this has changed over time. It breaks the norm by conveying how it is often veiled. The title suggests that women are in the process of change. By showing their gradual revealing of the female body, the painting reveals that women are often hidden and their voices are suppressed. It implies that the painting serves as a powerful reminder of the strength and resilience of women in the face of oppression.



Fig. 4: Dr Rani Jha. Changing Women.

Figure 5 "Modern Woman as Durga" by Kamlesh Rai depicts a modern woman as the Hindu goddess Durga, traditionally associated with power, strength and protection. The painting is open to many interpretations but generally celebrates the idea that modern women embody the qualities of a goddess and are empowered. The expectations and jobs placed on women vary according to culture, tradition and individual circumstances. In many societies, women are expected to play multiple roles as wives, mothers, and caregivers, pursue careers, and participate in public life. This is difficult and can lead to stress, burnout, and other negative effects. Some believe they need to work to support themselves and their families, while others choose a career for personal or professional reasons. Ultimately, the decision to manage work and home at the same time is a personal decision that depends on individual life circumstances and priorities. Madhubani paintings celebrate the strength and power of modern women, no matter which path they choose in life.



Fig. 5:Kamlesh Rai. Modern Woman as Durga.

Figure 6, Dr Rhani Jha's stunning piece of art, "Sky is My Canvas," honors Madhubani, a priceless style of Indian art that originated in the Mithila region of India. Through the use of vivid colors and intricate details, this painting emphasizes the power and emancipation of women. The painting makes use of things like stylized depictions of birds, vegetation, and a female figure. A deep blue sky painted with a rainbow of jewels surrounds the female figure, which is dressed in vibrant hues and represents the woman's strength, advancement, and growth. The woman in the painting is portrayed in both her traditional and liberated roles, symbolically representing her liberated identity. The painting's blue sky represents the heights she is capable of reaching while its vibrant colours denote her strength and accomplishments. The female figure represents strength and resiliency, while the birds, a common Madhubani motif, stand for the need for freedom. Her dress' elaborate floral adornments make reference to both her spiritual and physical prowess.



Fig. 6: Dr Rhani Jha. Sky is my Canvas.

In figure 7, Arti Kumari emphasizes the close relationship between women and nature in her painting “Women as Mother Nature” through her exquisite and intricate creations. In the painting, a woman is in the foreground and is surrounded by plants and animals. Symbolizing the idea that women are ever-changing, encompassing day and night, and a representation of the cycle of life as a whole, she has a halo on her head with the sun and the crescent moon. This woman exudes energy from her hands, illuminating the patterns and hues all around her. Her waist-tied, vivid teal robes serve as a bridge between the sky and the ground. The image of the woman as the dynamic force of nature is thus conveyed in the painting. The use of vivid colours in “Women as Mother Nature”, including shades of blue, yellow, red, and green, further exemplifies the protagonist's connection to nature. The painting also cleverly incorporates a variety of leaves and flowers, as well as monkeys, birds, and other animals to create the illusion of movement. This suggests that women are the source of nature's vitality and are capable of forging thriving landscapes.



Fig. 7: Arti Kumari. Women as Mother Nature.

Figure 8, Pinki Kumari's painting "Women's Woes of Universality of Patriarchy" offers a perceptive analysis of the countless problems that women encounter under the system of universal patriarchy. Pinki Kumari uses intricate artistry produced by the Madhubani painting technique to illustrate the oppression that women experience. The painting features a woman in the center, surrounded by elaborate patterns that represent the struggles she has faced. A woman who represents the ongoing fight for women's emancipation is placed in the painting's center. Contrasting with the dull ochre, black, and white layers around her is the woman's bright pink saree. The pink colour of the sari represents hope and faith and is a prime example of the emancipationist spirit. The 'saath phere' embroidery on the woman's saree makes it clear that she is fighting against a broken society despite her determination to fight for her rights. Each of these seven circles represents the commitment a married woman makes to support and serve her family. Additionally, there are tree motifs in the painting,

which are interpreted as a metaphor for the development of her spirit. Thus this artwork serves as a testament to the strength and beauty of women in our society.



Fig. 8: Pinki Kumari. Women's Woes of Universality of Patriarchy.

All civilizations go through modifications, yet the quantity and quality of change differ enormously. The factors that determine the course of changes are the level of flexibility promoted by a culture and its specific needs at a given moment. Accepting cultural changes, even when they are intended to be advantageous, can be challenging for individuals within a culture due to the influence of specific norms and beliefs. For social change to be secure, people's beliefs and value systems must change so that they become more adaptable and responsive to natural growth and development. Women play an important role as agents of change in the process of development and growth, as they shape and motivate the next generation and play a key role in the decision-making processes of traditional societies. "For that we should also focus and understand women as a game changer and treat as equal partners in progress with compare to men"(Paper, 2015). In recent years, however, this rapidly evolving field has begun to discuss contemporary feminist issues and their ideas about equality.

In conclusion, this study examined the representation of liberated women in Madhubani paintings in the context of changing attitudes towards women and the emergence of new feminist perspectives. Analysis of selected paintings reveals that Madhubani art form has evolved to embrace new images of independent, confident, and assertive women. This shift in women's representation reflects the changing status of women in Indian society, where women are increasingly asserting their rights and challenging gender norms. The influence of a feminist perspective on Madhubani paintings is significant, as it provides the artist with a

platform to reflect on the changing roles and status of women in society. Painting not only challenges traditional gender roles and stereotypes but also provides a space for women to celebrate their newfound freedom and independence. These paintings have become an important venue for representing women in Indian art. In summary, the emergence of a new feminist perspective has led to a fundamental change in the depiction of women in Madhubani paintings. It helped shape the new story in which Madhubani paintings will continue to play an important role in shaping debates about women's rights and gender equality, both in India and beyond.

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