

Chapter 1

Introduction: Mithila *Kohbar* Art

Kohbar (nuptial chamber) painting is supposed to have started some 2500 years ago when the palace of Mithila at Janakpur was painted with this artwork to herald a blissful, conjugal life for bride Sita and groom Ram. Since then, what is known as *kohbar* painting has been customary on the walls of the nuptial chamber during the solemnizing of marriage in Mithila. The *kohbar* paintings draw and decorate the moon, sun, tortoise, snake, lotus and bamboo trees as symbols of the female and male genitalia. The nine planets or *navgraha* is also given room in this painting to confer blessing on the newlyweds.

W. G. Archer is the first critic who, in 1949, interpreted “the bamboo tree and the ring of lotuses” as the diagrams of the sexual organs” (28) and the tortoises “as diagrammatic of the lovers’ union” (29). Since then, critics—mostly from the West—have read *kohbar* painting as sexual play. For example, Yves Vequaud’s *The Art of Mithila: Ceremonial Paintings from an Ancient Kingdom*, takes the lotus and bamboo as representations of the vagina and the penis: “The *kohbar*’s basic design and composition is heavily charged with tantric symbolism, and in its centre a lingam, the phallus, penetrates the circular beauty of a yoni, the symbol of the female genitals, often drawn as a fully-opened lotus” (17).

The above line of criticism is rejected by Carolyn Henning Brown who dismisses it “free-floating symbolic interpretation” (720). Dismissive of sexual interpretation, Jyotindra Jain interprets the lotus penetrated by a shaft in *kohbar* painting in terms of fecundity:

It primarily represents the lotus plant, with its jar-muri or roots and stem from which leaves grow in various directions. The floral medallions, that surround the central stem, like a ring, are not lotus flowers but pat or leaves. On account of their floral form, many scholars have mistaken the lotus leaves for

flowers. Similarly, the central vertical stemcutting across the ring of lotus leaves is not meant to be a bamboo shaft but the ‘stem and roots’ of the lotus plant....The entire kohbar motif, with its roots, stem, and proliferating leaves, is the symbol of the bride or the female but is not, as some scholars have it, her yoni or sexual organ. (55)

Situating the problematic somewhere between the middle of these extreme levels of criticism, the dissertation has tried to move forward with the presumption that women-artists of Mithila cannot keep themselves immune from the patriarchal discourse on tantra which has influenced Mithila art but they also bring their agency of wifedom and fertility into the foreground. With this presumption in mind, this dissertation sought to bring to light the poetics and politics of *kohbar* painting.

The research questions the dissertation has attempted to raise and answers are the following. What is the poetics of *kohbar* painting? What is its central theme of *kohbar* painting? Does it symbolize sexual play or happy conjugal life with fondness, fecundity, and prosperity? What worldview embeds this artwork? What is the underlying politics? This dissertation seeks to find answers to these questions.

The aesthetic of *Kohbar* painting, this dissertation has argued, is based on the Hindu philosophy of tantra, which is a patriarchal discourse on the creative and destructive force of Gauri and on which Maithil women artists draw and deviate at the same time. Although the lines drawn in *kohbar* painting are not different the *aripan*-like geometrical lines symbolizing male (Shiva) and female (Shakti) sexual potency, the variations introduced by women artists shift the focus from sexual ecstasy to conjugal fondness, fertility, and prosperity. As such, the hypothesis that has been attempted to prove is that the feminine principle privileged through *kohbar* painting is wifedom and motherhood—a departure from the patriarchal othering of a woman’s sexuality as creative but dangerous.

The methodological framework for analysis comes from two sources: the philosophy of *tantra* (existing in Mithila at the level of praxis in popular culture) and the theory of social semiotics. While the philosophy of *tantra* throws a flood of light on upon the tantric inflections of *kohbar* painting, the theory of social semiotics helps to bring to light the social / gendered meaning of the artwork.

Mithila, situated on the eastern side of what is culturally known as *Bharatvasha*, has a strong Goddess tradition. The symbolism embedded in Goddess traditions of Mahakali, Kali, Durga, or Gauri has been instrumental to making and justifying a room for matriarchy in what is a basically patriarchal society. The main philosophical argument behind the symbolism is that a female sexual metamorphosis has paved the way for human civilization. In the human female, sex is not tied to estrus. Women may experience sexual ecstasy in the absence of any necessary precondition, unlike men who must achieve erection. Self-transcendence in sexual ecstasy led women to their first intuition of ecstatic states not tied to sex, the first mystical experiences which generated ritual and religion. In this connection, Monica Sjöö and Barbara Mor observe:

Contemporary researchers have found neurological connections between religious or trance experience and female sexuality. In women's brains there are unique neural links between the forebrain and the cerebellum, which allow sensations of physical pleasure to be directly integrated into the neocortex, or high brain center. This explains why some women experience orgasm so intense that they enter 'religious' trance, or altered states of consciousness. And this ecstatic female orgasmic experience, in which the physical and the spiritual are fused and realized as one, is at the core of all mystical experience. This is why, in the original religion of the Great Mother, body and mind and spirit are always integrated. Because human male brains do not seem to have

these neurological connections . . . , the researchers conclude that it is women who must take the lead in further human evolution—‘toward the integration of the conscious and the unconscious mind and to a more profound understanding of the spiritual nature of the species.’ (53-54)

But this ecstatic energy which led to matriarchal organization did not lead to dominance, since matriarchies are built on blood kinship, not power.

In Hinduism, a balance between matriarchy and patriarchy has been sought to be struck through the synthesis of masculine and feminine energies of the universe—*Purusha* and *Prakriti*—in the figure of *Ardhanarishwara* Shiva and Parvati as in the following painting:



(Fig. 1: *Ardhanarishwara* Shiva and Parvati by Hira Devi:

This androgynous manifestation of Shiva and Parvati valorizes the union of female and male energies as the root and womb of all creation. Balance of the two contrasting energies within a human being can also enable him or her to live a life of fulfillment just as them or as the male and female serpents—the female on the left side and the male—a little longer—on the right side. Shiva and Parvati become one soul and body, incarnated as *ardhnareshwar*—meaning half man and half woman. Regarded as the celestial overlord of deliverance through destruction, Shiva is one of the most complex Hindu gods, embodying seemingly contradictory qualities—at once the destroyer and the restorer, the great ascetic and the symbol of sensuality, the benevolent herdsman of souls and the wrathful avenger. The beautiful consort of Shiva, Parvati is adored and petitioned by wives seeking a happy married life. The painting expresses the Hindu belief that, after marriage, husband and wife become one in eternity.

The *Prakrati*, also known as *Shakti*, is “is defined as wisdom and emptiness, which is space. These qualities are astute and pervasive, intelligent energies. They can be keen and perceptive, sensitive and all-inclusive” whereas *Purusha* or the masculine principle is “is defined as skillful means and compassion. These qualities show up as strength, resilience, tolerance, patience, accommodation, loyalty, groundedness, reliability and group orientation” (Therese George). The *Shakti*—the feminine principle— has, however, been misunderstood as a weakness because of the ascendancy of patriarchy over the years and in recent years due to the rise of the commercial culture, the mantra of which is the Darwinian philosophy of the survival of the fittest. Poise between the feminine and the masculine energies, on the other hand, privileges a dualistic worldview which accommodates all hierarchies stemming from binarism and which transforms them all into a non-dualistic worldview. This is what is the meaning of the word *Tantra*, which means “to weave”: “In the *tantric* lifestyle, we weave together all aspects of our lives into one harmonious whole. Work becomes a meditation,

making love becomes our spiritual practice, the lover and the beloved melt into one” (Lokita Carter).

Tantrism is a living proof of some of the ancient matriarchal beliefs, techniques, and ritual worship. The female-energy symbolism used by *Tantrika*—the vulva, caves, the earth, the community of women—has survived in Vedic reformulations, which are otherwise male-oriented in their dogma, and not at all likely to have discovered the female principle for themselves. All such transmission was bound to have happened entirely outside the Hindu caste system, which depends on strict adherence to patriarchal rule for its existence. The Sanskrit word for “caste”—*varna*—means “color.” The Hindu concept of lawlessness originally meant “the corruption of women” which was believed to lead to social chaos, or “caste-mixture.” So, the female *Tantric* practitioners and transmitters would have been out-castes—pariah—, and considered defiling as sexual partners.

That *tantrism* has survived in Mithila despite the patriarchal nature of the society speaks volumes of the openness of this culture to even the prohibited. The spirit of tolerance in Maithili culture is amazing. Throwing a flood of light on the Tantric underpinnings of the Maithili society, Yatindra Kaudinya writes:

Mithila has developed various tantric cultures. During the medieval period especially from the Oinwar dynasty of Mithila to the early Kharore dynasty up to 18th century, band of tantric scholars flourished in Mithila and created a history in the tantric world. Shiva and Shakti cult are the main source of tantric tradition of Mithila. Vidyapati, Mahesh Thakur, Chanda etc .have their major impact on the tantric culture of Mithila.

The folk tale of Anamgusuma refers Tantric rituals spread in this society. But during the days of Huen-tsang Mithila was a vedic country. The king Arjuna

or Arunashwa merely a samat of king Harsha was a prominent follower of Vedic culture. According to the Chinese source king Arunashwa was defeated by the combined army of Nepal, China and Tibbat in 8th century just after the death of king Harsha and the Vedic culture was abolished from Mithila. Thereafter the Mahayani tantric culture started in Mithila.

Madhuvani art or paintings express the most significant Maithili aspect of tantra. Nowadays various Maithili rituals are associated with tantra. It is a very common saying that tantra was originated in Bengal and nourished in Mithila. Recently Pt. Laxmipati's scholarly article on the tantric structure of Mithila i.e. Yantramayi Mithila is so interesting which describes the tantric significance of Mithila. Actually this holy land was worshiped by the tantrikas in the form of yantra i.e. static form of highly dynamic consciousness. Hence it's tantric significance. Though different religious systems found favour in Mithila, in the gradual course of evolution tantrism became predominant in the religious belief of the people of Mithila. Thus Shiva, Shakti and Vishnu became the main inspirers of the people. It has, therefore, been

pointed out that three fold marks on the forehead of a Maithila represented the following symbols—the horizontal lines, marked with ashes, represents devotion to Siva; the vertical sandal-paste in white represents faith in Vishnu and the vermilion red mark represents veneration for Sakti. (Radhakrishna Chaudhary 303-04)

In the contemporary Mithila, Vishnu is relegated to the secondary position and now it is only Shiva and Shakti worships that have assumed salience in the religious life of Mithila. In every house, Shiva and Shakti, in different images and names, are being worshipped. There are two modes of their worships—one is devotional or Vaisnavism (i.e., seeking union with Shakti

through *bhakti*) and other is *tantric*. The basic objective, however, remains the same, that is of obtaining *moksha* or salvation.

The *tantric* cult as prevalent in Mithila is a yogic exercise in which Shiva or Shakti is conceived by performing certain rituals (*puja*) over a *yantra*. The *tantric* rituals lay stress on five elements, essential to *tantrik siddhi* known as *Panchamakaras* viz., *madya* (wine) , *mamsa* (meat) , *matsya* (fish), *mudra* (parched grain) and *maithuna* (sexual intercourse). *Panchamakara* is invariably attached with every *tantrik puja* in Mithila. The main aim of *tantra* is sublimation through rationale and symbolism. The ultimate objective of a *tantrik* is, therefore, *moksha*. Once a person achieves *moksha*, he is no longer a subject of rebirth. There are many stages involved in *tantra sadhna* and each stage is an elaborate procedure of different types or techniques of *siddhi*. Only by successfully completing each stage of *tantrik sadhna* that a person can seek complete submergence in the formless energy—that is the mother of creation.

According to Radhakrishna Chaudhary, the prevalence of *Shakti* cult in Mithila can be gleaned from the following social customs:

- *Gosuni Puja* in every household.
- First verse taught to a child is in praise of *Shakti*.
- *Aripana* is closely associated with the *tantric chakra*.
- *Paga* is also associated with the *Tantric* belief.
- *Patari* ceremony, i.e., feeding of *Kumar is* (generally Brahmanas) on all auspicious occasions.
- Predominance of the Vijayadasami ceremony and its association with *sadhana*.
- Worship of Shiva-Linga, the *Matrakpuja* and *Naina-Jogin* sport.
- The custom of taking *Diksa* from *Guru*.

- The association of *Mithilaksara* with tantric Yantra—the *Varnoddharatantra* and the *Kamadhenu tantra* give a succinct account of the peculiar development of the *Varnas*.
- The predominance of *Vamacara* and *Dasa-Mahavidya* in Mithila. (311-12)

Shakti worship revolves round the ten Mahavidyas - (i) *Kali*, (ii) *Tara*, (iii) *Shorashi*, (iv) *Bhubneshwari*, (v) *Bhairavi*, (vi) *Chninnamasta*, *Bangalamukhi*, (ix) *Matangi* and (vii) *Dhumawati*, (viii) (x) *Kamala*. For each of these *mahavidyas*, there are separate methods of *upasana*. Popularization of *Shakti* cult in Mithila is also due to the fact that it received patronage from local zamindars and feudal lords.

Tantric painting in Mithila—a combination of line as well as colour paintings—finds expressions in full form mostly in *aripans* and in reduced form in *kohbar* artworks. The main focus is religious acts. A geometrical diagram *yantra* is drawn. Each God has different *yantra*. *Yantra* is a geometrical abode of God or Goddess on which *mantra* is chanted and mediated to attract or to draw the attention of particular God. *Tantra* is a geometrical progression in which each stage is marked by particular *Siddhi*, ultimately sublimating and merging oneself in the final energy—*Shakti*—the creator of universe: *tantra* = *yantra* + *mantra*.

The method of *mantra* is used to invoke divine power for positive and negative purposes through the use of mind or thought power (man+tra). In *yantras* the restraining power (yan + tra) of the will is used for the same purpose. The *tantras* are meant for the transformation and transmission of the sexual power of the body from the lower planes to higher planes through the use of *tantu* (nerve fibers). Thus, *tantra* means the use of the body power (tan + tra) or the use of the nerves in the body (tant + tra) or both. *Tantu* is also a symbolic reference to God or Self (*Tantunama* or *Tantu Nadha*), who is the lord of the body. In that sense, *tantra* means the use of *Shakti*—the primordial energy— for self-transformation

and liberation. In this regard, Monica Sjöö and Barbara Mor add that *tantrikas*—the practitioners of *tantra*—

teach that pleasure, vision, and ecstasy should be cultivated and used by all—not suppressed and damned, not hoarded for the corrupt thrills of the few. Tantra proclaims that all things—the crimes and pains as well as the joys and benefits of life—are the active play of the female creative principle: the Goddess of many forms, sexually penetrated by an invisible, indescribable, seminal male. The Tantrika use prolonged acts of ecstatic meditation in sexual union with a partner. They use liturgies, mantras, inner visualizations, yogic postures, and manipulation of the joined female and male energies. The Goddess is perceived as the energy which makes real the outer and inner worlds, the complementary images of object and subject, spinning them out from the still center—as a spider spins a web from her body—into the open space of being. (221-22)

Tantric practice enables one to become aware of one's own incredible potential, and to realize and experience joy in being one with the cosmos . . . There is no place for renunciation or denial in *tantra*. Instead, we must involve ourselves in all the life processes which surround us. The spiritual is not something that descends from above, rather it is an illumination that is to be discovered within. This illumination unfolds within both the mental processes and the physicality of the body.

Unlike *Advaita* Vedantic tradition, the *tantric* path does not reject the body as profane but regards it as the vehicle of transcendence. Rather than subdue, *tantra* teaches us to realize and harness the potential of the senses. Sexual instinct, an all pervading urge, is the physical basis of creation and of mankind's evolution. Sex is the cosmic union of opposites from which everything and every being arises. Its importance demands its fulfillment. The

recognition of sex as a cosmic union of the opposites is revealed not only in the *tantrika*'s more open attitude toward sex but also in the frequently graphic depictions of copulating lovers in tantric art, which finds a veiled, toned down entry in Maithili *kohbar* painting. This theme of the union of the opposites—the feminine and the masculine— is the one that pervades the *kohbar* art.

In Tantric forms of *Shakti* worship, Kali is worthy of fearful devotion and is the revered mother goddess as in the following painting:



Fig. 2: Kali with Her *Yantra* by Vidyanath Jha.

This artwork presents Kali as one of the most important *tantric Dasamahavidyas*, as a conglomeration of terrifying elements. Though the picture field is, however, filled with leaves and flowers. The juxtaposition of the terrifying elements—the black colour of the body, the dishevelled hair forming a curtain of death, the blood-red lolling tongue and the

severed human head with vegetation, life and flower-like softness. Below the picture of the Goddess has been placed are *yantra*. The triangle represents the three worlds, the three *gunas*: the neutral, the positive and the negative—*sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. The triangle with its apex upward represents the *yonis* or female organ, the seat of *Shakti*, the female energy or nature (*Prakriti*). The triangle pointing downward is identified with the male principle (*Purusha*). Artist Jha, thus presents Kali as the symbol of the active cosmic power of both creation and destruction, inspiring love and awe at the same time. Kali as an embodiment of *Prakriti* is the earth itself—both wild and domesticated.

Wild, Kali is a woman. Domesticated, she is the wife. In Hindu mythology, wild earth is visualized as Kali, an unclothed goddess, fearsome, naked, bloodthirsty, one with hair unbound. Domesticated earth is visualized as Gauri, the goddess of civilization, gentle, demure, beautiful, draped in cloth. Gauri's cloth represents the rules that turn nature into civilization—rules such as marital fidelity, which ensure that even the weakest of men has conjugal security. If Kali as a manifestation of the synthesis of masculine and feminine energies of the universe is symbolic of primordially oppression-less and discrimination-less cosmology, Gauri represents a civilizationally-patriarchially domesticated Cosmic Mother. The journey of the Hindu Cosmic Mother from Kali to Gauri marks the decline of matriarchy and the rise of patriarchy.

In order to discover the meaning of *kohbar* art in terms of wifhood, the analytical framework utilized is social semiotics, which is a standard cultural studies methodology for understanding still images. Semiotics is generally described as the “study of signs.” For a sign to exist, there must be meaning or content or the signified manifested through some form of expression or the signifier. Signs are often organized as codes governed by explicit and implicit rules agreed upon by members of a culture or social group. A system of signs may thus carry encoded meanings and messages that can be read by those who understand the

codes. A signifying structure composed of signs and codes is a text that can be read for its signs and encoded meanings. A text, whether verbal or visual, can be fully appreciated if seen in cultural context. When the socio-cultural power relationships are examined, the historical forces shaping the text are understood. Such a method of analysis is called social semiotics.

The semiotics that this methodology proposes is socio-centered, going from context to text, not from text to context. In this method, a key question that crops up in analyst's kind is how people make signs in the context of interpersonal and institutional power relations to achieve specific aims. The question is essentially significant because semiotic systems can shape social relations and society itself and *vice-versa*. So, a piece of painting, which is a socio-semiotic mode, serves several communicational and representational requirements, in order to function as a full system of communication. Based on this methodology, the socio-centered symbolization of Mithila painting is expressive of a negotiated view of social reality.

Analysts view cultural products not simply as instruments of domination, but as incorporating elements of resistance as well. The angle of analysis is that of the underdog rather than that of the top dog. In their seminal work, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, Kress and van Leeuwen set out the first social semiotic framework for analyzing images, noting that "We intend to provide inventories of the major compositional structures which have become established as conventions in the course of the history of visual semiotics and to analyze how they are used to produce meaning by . . . image-makers" (1). Their method of analysis isolates logonomic rules which govern the conditions for production and reception of meanings. An understanding of the rules specify who claims to initiate or know meanings about what topic under what circumstances and with what modalities. Sign systems and systems of logonomic rules are dialectically linked to discourse and texts. The latter are shaped by but also shape the former. The link is ideologically constituted in contradictory ways as heterogenous rather than homogeneous systems and contested in

struggle. When a logonomic system puts up with, for example, a speech offensive to women to be taken as a joke, it refers to males' domination of women and, of course, also the resistance by the latter. Let's understand with a socio-semiotic analysis of the following piece of painting:



Fig. 3: "Better a Tree than a Girl" by Gunjeshwar Kumari

Here the logonomic system in tolerates the forced abortion of girl babies. Set against a black background, the incised white images, like specters in a nightmare, tell the story of a

marriage and the young mother's reluctant abortion of her female fetus. In her sorrow, she sees a tree in blossom with its many pink flowers and imagines the flowers to be the spirits of all the aborted baby girls. Her muted resistance is her musing that it would be better to be a tree than a girl because then she would have her baby girl. A fundamental aspect of social semiotic theory is the guiding principle that a mode of communication, for example a visual image like the above piece of painting by Gunjeshwar Kumari, offers socially specific and culturally shared options as semiotic resources for communicating.

This dissertation, by making a socio-semiotic analysis of *kohbar* paintings tries to tease out their socio-cultural meanings.

Chapter 2

Poetics of Mithila *Kohbar* Art

One of the oldest folk art forms to originate from South Asia is Mithila painting, which is all about celebrating different occasions, festivals and good fortune. Traditionally, these paintings are based on mythological, folk themes and pastoral symbols. The basics in these paintings are geometric and floral pattern, animal and bird motifs as well as gods and goddesses.

Traditionally, these paintings were done with fingers or using twigs, brushes, nib-pens, and matchsticks on freshly plastered mud walls of huts. Now, these are also done on cloth, hand-made paper, wood and canvas. Usually, no space is left empty in this art form; gaps are filled by paintings of flowers, animals, birds and even geometric designs.

Prominent colours include pink, parrot green, red, copper blue, sulphate blue, yellow and dark blue. Double borders and a black outline are compulsory. Earlier, colours were derived from natural sources like plants, charcoal soot, ochre etc. Black colour was obtained by mixing soot with cow dung while yellow colour was made by mixing turmeric, pollen or lime with the milk of banyan leaves. Red colour was derived from the *Kusum* flower juice or red sandalwood. Meanwhile, leaves of apple trees were used to obtain green colour, rice powder for white colour and *palasha* flowers were used to get orange colour.

Different schools of Madhubani paintings have been traditionally classified into three types: Brahmin tradition, Kayastha tradition, and *godana* or tattoo tradition. The first one is by the Brahmins. They are regarded as the highest among the three castes. Their paintings have vibrant colors and religious motifs of various gods. As they have easy access to sacred texts, they portray the mythological and religious motifs with ease, for example, the following *kohbar* painting by Sita Devi:



Fig. 4: *Brahmin Style in Bright Colours* by Sita Devi

Apart from a liberal use of bright red and yellow colours in contrast to a sparse sprinkling of the black colour, what sets apart the *kohbar* painting in the Brahmin tradition is filling in the space with the icons of God (Shiva) and Goddess (Parvati) and its suffusion with Tantric symbols the its additional motifs of gods or goddesses and tantric symbols of the painted terracotta pitcher with a lamp and a deliberate, repeated invoking of Cosmic Mother in Her Devi form in the centre.

The coloured Mithila painting are drawn by the Brahman women artists. These are religiously-philosophically elegant paintings which regale the lovers of arts and paintings

boundlessly. The unique combination of natural colours lends immense elegance and serene grandeur to the paintings in what is called the *bharani* (fill-in) style.

Kayastha women produce drawings in black, and sometimes red or vermillion, the outlines of which are not coloured in what is called the *kachani* style. Their style of painting—foregrounding of lines rather than colours—includes motifs symbolizing procreation. Some common motifs used by them are lotus plant, sacred symbols, fish, tortoises, parrots and birds. No empty space is left the painting. After drawing the main theme, several linear designs of natural and geometrical as well as specious motifs are made in the background. Distinct lines are used to outline coloured forms and create abstract patterns that fill the background. Crosshatch lines cross over one another forming a pattern that looks like a grid. Curvilinear lines are smooth and round, bending in all different directions. Parallel lines all run in the same direction, never crossing each other. Let us have a look at the following piece:



Fig. 5: Kohbar Painting in Kachani Style

In a marked departure from Fig. 4, Fig. 5 uses one muted colour which is rather backgrounded in an intentional foregrounding of lines. Similarly there is lesser invoking of the tantric philosophy and a greater depiction of the motif of fertility through a focus on lotus plant, fish, tortoises, and parrots. What is most remarkable is not offering prime place to the Gauri Puja, which has been relegated to the bottom on the right corner.

In noticeable contrast to the first two styles of Mithila painting, the one adopted by the lower, scheduled castes is called *godana* or tattoo style as in the following piece:

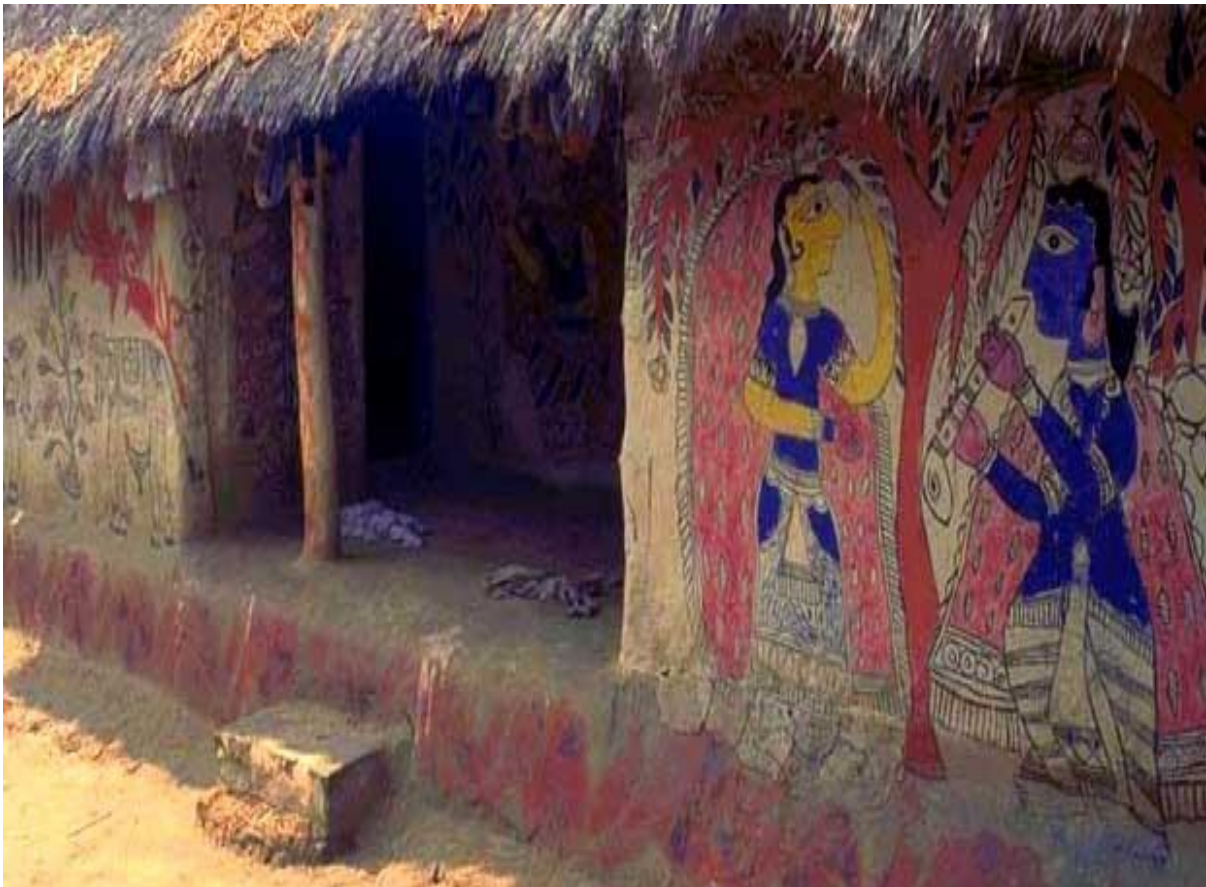


Fig. 6: Mithila Painting in Godana Style

The under-privileged, untouchable women of scheduled caste in Mithila could not remain apart from the rippling stream of arts and paintings. They also evolved themselves in the creation of painting in a different way. The afflicted *Dalit* women living in their dingy and

dilapidated thatched houses beautifully emblazon their mud-built walls with the sparkling figures like the sun, the moon, trees, flowers, foliage, birds, fishes and also, to some extent, gods and goddesses. Exclusively they have singularly specialized themselves in tattoo painting.

Whatever the styles, kohbar painting has been characterized as folk art. The first book-length work on Mithila painting, Yves Vequaud's *The Women Painters of Mithila: Ceremonial Paintings from an Ancient Kingdom*, opens:

For three thousand years, perhaps, the women of Mithila—and only the women— have painted the gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon, in the form of prayer. It is no exaggeration to affirm that the art of Mithila is the expression of the most authentic Indian civilization. (16)

The collectivity of Madhubani women painters are asked to represent a still larger collectivity, the authentic Indian civilization. And in Vequaud's romantic projection, this ancient civilization is, in its pure form, a thoroughly religious one. He correctly notes that the original purpose of this style of painting was to decorate the interior walls of domestic nuptial chambers (*kohbar ghar*) for the edification and pleasure of newly married couples. As a form of domestic decorative art, *kohbar* artwork is integral to key life-cycle rituals in the Mithila region.

For life-cycle rites Maithil women outline auspicious geometrical designs, called *aripan*, on smooth floors and courtyards. Exposed to the wear of feet and the elements, these designs were occasion-specific and deliberately ephemeral. For the annual festival of Dashain, the women fill the walls beside the kitchen door with images of the goddess. They painted the shrines of their family deities, usually kept in the kitchen. The women, however, devote their greatest artistic efforts to the painting of the *kohbar ghar*, the wedding chamber

within each family compound. From the perspective of these women, marriage transforms a girl from a virgin (*kaniya*) into an auspicious and productive wife of a living husband (*suhag*), and therefore this ritual is crucial to the continuation and prosperity of the family. After spending three nights in the *kohbar ghar* in pursuit of the divine blessing for a fecund, happy conjugal life the bride and the bridegroom initiate themselves into sexual intercourse on the fourth night in the same nuptial chamber. What is most remarkable is that the bride and bridegroom worship Gauri every morning in this four-day period. On the fifth day the bride travels with the groom to his family home, and there they observe a similar round of ceremonies in the wedding chamber of the groom's home.

To begin the *kohbar ghar* painting, the women artists locate the center of the central (eastern) wall of the wedding chamber, and mark it with a vermilion dot. They understand this spot to be the emanating center of the entire composition. As the artist Ganga Devi puts it, the dot is “like the kernel from which the lotus plant sprouts and gradually proliferates, to finally take over the entire pond” (qtd. in Jyotindra Jain 54). From this center the design spreads outwards toward the periphery of the available space, in what Jain terms a “centrifugal” method of composition (54).

The most striking design, called the *kohbar*, occupies a central position on the main wall. This complex, abstract-looking motif is based on the lotus plant, with its stem, roots, and leaves forming an intricate symmetrical composition. The *kohbar* is identified with the bride herself, and with the pious hope that the bride will be as fecund as the proliferating lotus. Surrounding the central *kohbar* swim and fly numerous other creatures of pond and sky— fish, turtles, snakes, bees, parrots, and others. The sun and moon float above the *kohbar* to lend their auspicious presence. Frequently, a dense thatch grove of bamboo occupies an area to the viewer's right of the *kohbar* motif. Bamboo grows fast and frequent; just like the way Maithil women want the marriage to grow. *Sasthi*, the presiding deity of

childbirth, is often represented. Along the lower parts of the wall the bride and groom also appear. They are shown being carried in wedding palanquins or offering worship to the goddess Gauri. The entire available space is filled with vivid, proliferating life forms because, as Jyotindra Jain remarks, “emptiness would be tantamount to infecundity” (54).

Along the other walls, images of the gods and goddesses appear. Prominent are four *naina-yogins* (“eye-goddesses,” identified with Kamakhya), who occupy the four corners of the chamber, and who will play an important role in the marriage rites held inside the wedding chamber.



Fig. 7: Naina-Jogin by Sita Devi

Many other deities join them, often in conjugal pairs like Shiva and Gauri, and Rama and Sita. The painting of these divine figures adheres to a fixed sequence of composition, with the

head drawn first, then upper body and arms, lower body and legs, and lastly the eyes. The ritualized painting procedure fits with their religious function, for during the wedding ceremonies the gods themselves are invoked into these paintings, and confer on the marriage their special blessings.

Summing up, what the aesthetic of the women's art of the nuptial chamber suggests is that it is reflexive: women construct metaphors for imaging their own nature. In imaging female nature as one of abundance and fecundity, they glorify it and seek to implant it, as powerfully as they are able with all their artistic skill and ceremony, within the new life of the bride as productive wife.

Chapter 3

Politics of Mithila *Kohbar* Art

Kohbar painting, as the previous chapter has mentioned, makes use of vegetal and animal forms, the sun, the moon, the bamboo tree, a circle of lotuses, ponds, parrots, turtles, and fish—all symbolizing fertility. However, none of the above more so than the bamboo tree and the pond with the lotus leaf and flower symbolize fecundity:

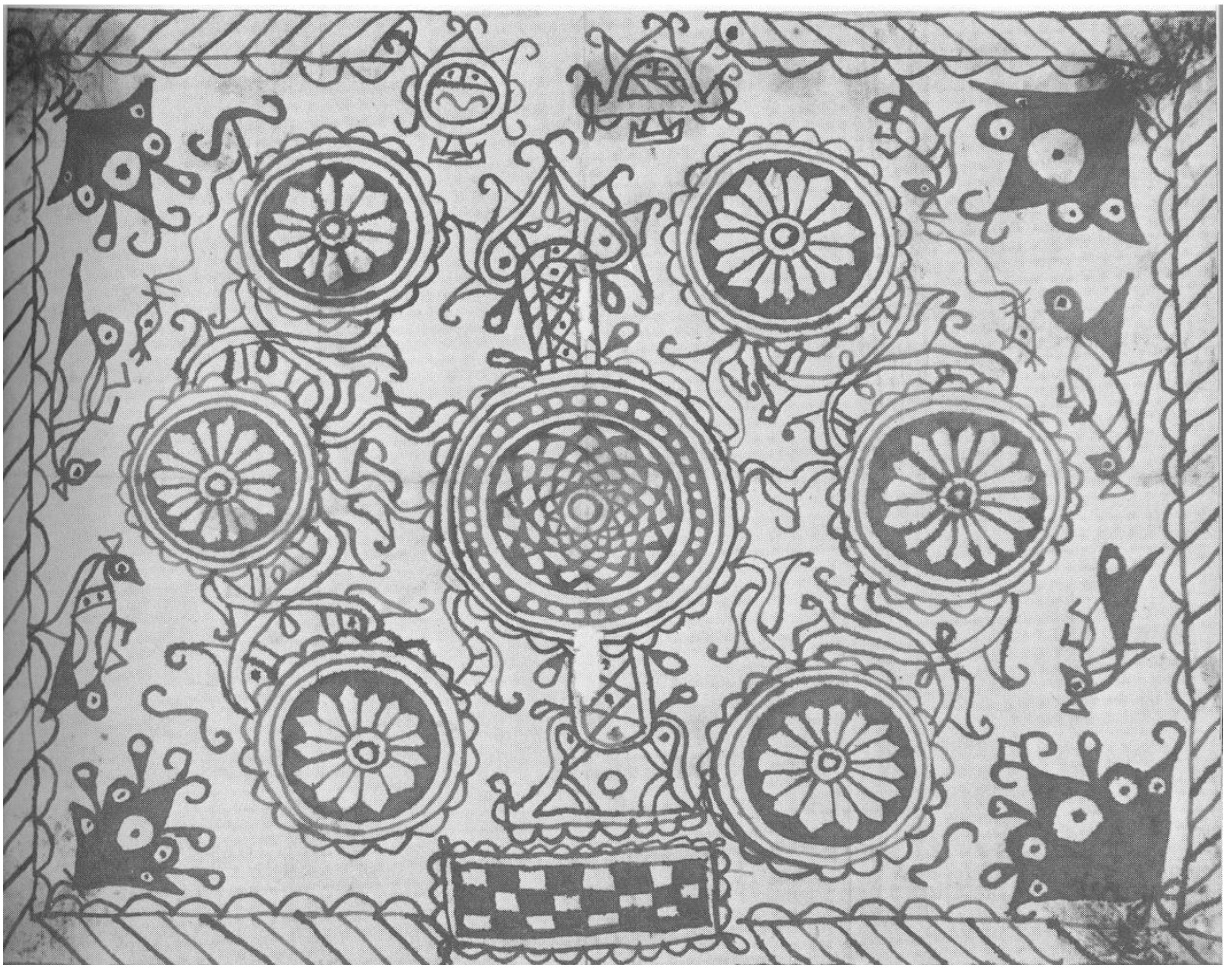


Fig. 8: A Traditional Kohbar Art

These two forms are not only paintings of the bamboo and lotus but also diagrams of the sexual organs. This chapter develops this line of analysis, extending it further to the figural forms and other vegetal and animal motifs. Aside from the blessings of the vegetal forms, the existence of the gods and goddesses in panels near the couple and the women's songs sung throughout the

ceremony suggest wishes for fertility and happiness in the marriage. Fertility is thus referenced in multiple ways in the depiction of the marriage ceremony.

The theme of the ideal marriage does not reside in any one motif, but rather is articulated in multiple ways through a range of visual motifs. The narrative panel of the bride and bridegroom enacting important parts of the ceremony is integrated with a depiction of the ideal marriage of the gods and goddesses and infused with ideal qualities associated with gods, animals, and lush vegetation. The following artwork contains such figures which portray fertility through pond life:



Fig. 8: Kayastha Wall Painting (Kohbar)

The above painting is filled with rich detail, each contributing significance to the meaning of the whole. The dominant theme is pond life, filled with life-forms and abundant in its productive powers. The painting seeks to ensure fertility of the bride and groom who, as when a seed is dropped into a pond, should produce offspring abundantly. The most prominent image looming largest on the canvas is the ring of lotus, called *purain*. The lotus leaves circle is a symbol of the female sex.

Central depictions in *kohbar* artwork constitute an assembly of symbolic images of the lotus plant, the bamboo grove, fishes, birds and snakes, besides those of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati. According to the Vedas and the Puranas, the wedding of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati was the most successful of all Gods and Goddesses. So through the painting, blessings are for a successful marital life as that of the above deities. Let's us a look at the following artwork:



Fig. 9: Pinki Kumari's Kohbar Painting

Pinki Kumari's nuptial chamber painting does away with the all-important circular lotus motif (*purain*), in relation to which all the other motifs on the wall are traditionally organized. In her painting, the image-field is densely filled with free-floating motifs— such as the sun and moon, the nine planets (*navagraha*), parrots, bees, fishes, snakes, tortoise, bamboo, colorful mat, earthen pots, and clay elephant— extracted from the ritual wall art. However, once the viewing time is prolonged, we realize that it is the micro-theme of the bride and the bridegroom performing Gauri puja over the terracotta elephant that dominates the image-field. The image depicts the bridal party in the kohbar ghar at the commencement of the Gauri Puja, during which the bride gives thanks to Gauri, an aspect of the goddess Parvati, for blessing her with a bridegroom like the god Shiva, her husband.

Many Maithil women conduct Gauri Puja repeatedly throughout their lives from early age. It is a daily affair for young unmarried girls to petition Gauri for suitable husbands through offerings of sindur (vermilion powder) to Gauri embodied in a betel nut placed atop a clay elephant (Fig. 9). The clay elephant is used again in the wedding, as Gauri Puja is performed daily during the four-day ceremony. Women continue to worship Gauri after the wedding, to thank her for a good husband and the perpetual well being of the home. Hence Gauri Puja takes on many meanings over the course of a woman's lifetime, despite the continuities of the ritual implements and actions.

For the Gauri Puja performed during the wedding, the bridegroom first plucks bel leaves from a branch hanging in the kohbar ghar for the bride to use in her Puja. Following this preparation, the bride begins her part of the Puja. As one ceremony has been described,

[o]n the head of the elephant a silver ring, a piece of wood, and an areca nut are placed, one over the other, and in that order from bottom to top. The bride, wearing an ivory ring around the little figure [sic] of her left hand, squats in front of the elephant, and while pressing gerli, a ring made of jute fibre, under

her right foot, she takes vermilion powder, pinch by pinch, from a plate and sprinkles it thrice over the installation on the elephant's head. Finally she puts some vermilion in the central parting of her own hair. As she performs this ritual, the bridegroom, standing behind her, holds the hand with which she makes the offering. (Ganga Devi qtd. in Jain 46)

In Gauri Puja, Behind the bridegroom stands the bride, poised in a moment of transition. Anticipating the bride's shift in status, attire and gesture present her in her future role as a married woman. The jewelry, given to the bride by both families at the time of her wedding, indicates her new status as a married woman and associates her with the *vidkari* (attendant), with whom she shares this ornamentation. Both wear delicate circular *nathi* (nose rings) and ornate *jhumka* (bell-shaped metal earrings), traditional elements of a bride's trousseau. Both women are also adorned with armbands ornamented with floral decoration and wear cuffs that fasten tightly at their wrists and ankles.

The women's well-defined jewelry has an inherent meaning that is more than just decoration or an auspicious gift. The jewelry speaks to the bride's fundamental identity from this point forward: that of wife and daughter-in-law. Wearing the *nathi* and *jhumka*, in combination with *sindur* in her hair and *bindi* (dot of vermilion) on her forehead, publicly marks her as a young married woman. In addition to the jewelry, the bride's clothing may be a cue regarding her status. Specifically, the bride's attire creates associations with the married *vidkari* (attendant) to the right. The bride wears a tight *choli* (short blouse) with a *ghaghra* (flared skirt). The *ghaghra* is vertically striped, with a banded waistline matching the material of her overskirt. The bride and attendant both have skirts trailing behind them and veils encircling their heads. Their short *cholis*, bare midriffs, and full skirts almost twin them, as do their gestures.

The bride's pose and gestures, along with her physical location between the attendant and the bridegroom, reinforce her transitional state as bride. The bride is physically linked to the attendant, who supports and guides her through the lengthy wedding ceremony. Here the attendant holds the betel leaves over the bride. Reaching behind the bride's *sari*, the attendant's arm creates a visual line through the bride to the bridegroom, highlighting the bride's dual status and allegiances. She is still attached to her natal family, especially her female relatives, while reaching for her new husband. Her head turns to the groom and her hand grasping his wrist link the couple, thereby asserting the bride's position in relation to him and his family. The physical contact with her husband also suggests the ritualized consummation of the marriage, which will take place later in the ceremony.

Two elements in the *kohbar ghar* mural highlight another aspect of the bride's transition; namely, the activation of the bride's sexuality and fertility, and her potential for motherhood. First, the peacock above the bride's head, typically associated with fertility, love, and sexual desire, echoes the pronounced curves of her veiled head. The peacock looks down on the bride, its beak pointing the viewer toward her, who in turn looks down at the union between herself and her new bridegroom, represented by their joined hands. Second, the large, heart-shaped leaves of the betel creeper held over the bride's head have long been reputed to have aphrodisiac and Ayurvedic heating properties. The leaves, when chewed alone or taken together with the prepared areca nut filling in *pan*, have a stimulating effect and are thought to increase mental and physical wellness.

By thus juxtaposing the wedding of Shiva and Parvati with that of the mortal couple through Gauri Puja, the *kohbar* mural reiterates the power of the wedding ritual, as it emphasizes both mortality and divinity in the sacred couple. It also marks the human couple at this time and their actions in this life cycle ritual as divine.

In the performance of the Gauri Puja ritual, the bridegroom may lead the wedding procession. The bridegroom wears a tall and extravagant *sehala* with a veil, a visual reminder of the bridegroom's likeness to Shiva in the ritual events. The flowing beads of the bridegroom's *sehala* connect him to two essential elements of Gauri Puja as they touch the bel tree and the bride. He plucks a *bel* leaf with his right hand, perhaps to put in the basket he holds with his bride. The bride gazes down at their interlinked hands. The bride, head inclined, is attired in a brilliantly patterned sari and ornamented. The attendant is visually linked to the bride as her arm extends to cover the bride with a fan, her hand touching the bride's sari. Three women follow after the attendant, carrying what appear to be articles for Gauri Puja into the *kohbar ghar* as in the following wall artwork:



Fig 10: Female Attendants

The first woman carries a decorated pot or pitcher that most likely contains water to purify the space or the performers of Gauri Puja. The second holds the clay elephant, the most distinctive element of Gauri Puja. It receives the areca nut, the embodiment of Gauri. The

third woman follows bearing either a *chumaonak dala* (bamboo platter) or a painted clay bowl with a scalloped edge. This platter may hold the vermilion powder that is used in the last segment of Gauri Puja, when the bride sprinkles vermilion over the areca nut on the elephant's head and applies a line of the red powder to the part in her hair. In adding these three attendants and displaying these additional items that will be used in the ritual, the painters place a reference to each step of Gauri Puja in one mural,

Thus, Gauri Puja murals in the *kohbar ghar* emphasize the bride's transition from daughter to wife, blessing of the new marriage, and celebration of the union of two families. Located between her female relatives and her new bridegroom, the bride displays all the marks of a newly married woman. In the traditional *kohbar ghar* painting, the bride is nothing less than a mirror to the divine Parvati. The bridegroom is no longer simply a man, as his *sehala* evokes comparisons to Shiva.

The priority given to the Gauri rather than the kali form of Parvati in *Mithila kohbar painting* is replete with the symbolism cultural-political power politics. From one perspective, Kali is a goddess of chaos; a sacred being that embodies that which cannot be controlled or contained. From another perspective, Kali is a dramatic expression of a mother's fierce, protective love for her children; the feminine power rising up to attack those who threaten her babies, including the husband. In short, she is an untamed wife—a fact captured in the following Mithila painting of Kali (Fig. 11). Gauri, on the other hand, is the mild form of Parvati who had gained the wifeness of great Lord Shiva with her extremely difficult penance. She is auspicious, brilliant and protects the good people while punishing those who perform evil deeds. The Goddess epitomizes the virtue of austerity, while signifying the importance of hard work and efforts in achieving our dreams and ambitions. She remains the very embodiment of purity, indicative of her penance to win the approval of Lord Shiva. Her dedication and devotion to Shiva is unparalleled, and she is often depicted as

a young unmarried maiden, willing to undertake severe austerities in a bid to win over her beloved Lord as her husband. She is thus the object of worship for many unmarried girls who wish to acquire a suitable groom through what is called Gauri Puja (please look at Fig. 12). Gauri is deeply revered by everyone but particularly more so by women, who adore the Goddess for her feminine characteristics.



Fig. 11: Goddess Kali Standing on Lord Shiva

The above painting (Fig. 11) emphasizes the active female, passive male roles by depicting Kali striding over either a supine Siva. Gauri, on the other hand, as Fig. 12 shows,



Fig. 12: Sita Performing Gauri Puja at the Time of Her Wedding by Abha Devi

is the portrayal of Parvati as gentle, modest and nurturing. The icon of Gauri standing in the left frame in the centre presents a sharp contrast in look from Kali in Fig. 11. Herein, Goddess Gauri is depicted with four arms, with two arms wielding a pellet drum and a trident in each. Her other two arms are in the *Abhaya Mudra* and *Varada Mudra*, which symbolize the boon giving gesture and the fear dispelling gesture respectively. She is also shown attired in yellow, green and red garments, symbolizing fertility and prosperity. She is also portrayed with a huge head dress on her head and her charming face is depicted as glowing with the radiance of youth.

That traditional Mithila society valorizes not so much the subversive Kali form of Parvati as much as her tamed, controlled image of wifehood is clear from the preponderance, in Mithila painting of Ram-Sita and Vishnu-Laxmi. Sita, the consort of Lord Ram (incarnation of Vishnu) and an avatar of Shree Laxmi, is esteemed as the paragon of spousal and feminine virtues for all women. She also personifies Earth's fertility, abundance and well-being, and wifely devotion and self-sacrifice. In traditional Mithila society Sita was, and

often still is, regarded as the epitome of the perfect wife; a woman who accepts her husband's opinion as final, who submits to his authority, who remains pure until marriage, who keeps her vows and is sweet, obedient, faithful and chaste. Sita stands for tradition. She is a figurehead for all those who seek to sacrifice themselves in the name of love. Let us have a look at the following piece by Vidyanath Jha:



Fig. 13: Ram Sita Wedding by Vidyanath Jha

This painting, made on handmade paper with natural colors using pen nibs and brushes, catches the moment of *varmala*. The artist's choice of the colour follows the traditional

iconography of Ram and Sita. While Ram's iconography shows him with a dark blue skin and as a well-dressed man, Sita in yellow skin and red and green dress symbolizes wealth, and fertility. The top border of leaves and flowers on her side, just above her head, reinforces her image of the goddess of agricultural abundance. Her fair skin shows her just as another manifestation of Gauri.

In Mithila, Rama and his wife Sita still today represent the perfect ideal marriage. Krishna, on the other hand, expresses the joyful celebration of divine love and play. The acceptance of Krishna's love for Radha, a married woman, is revealing. Perhaps this unorthodox relationship is on one level symbolic of human passion for the divine but on another releases emotions which are of necessity restrained in marriage rules and obligations. Marriage decisions are usually governed by an overriding sense of duty and obligation, not love or passion.



Fig. 14: Krishna Radha Romance by Nupur Nishith

Fig. 14 portrays the romance of Lord Krishna and Goddess Radha, one of the iconic couples of Hindu Mythology, and are considered as the symbol of love and devotion. In this painting, Lord Krishna and Goddess Radha are sitting on a swing exuding extreme love and affection for each other. The artist's choice of the colours for the icons suggests that she has depicted Krishna as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu and Radha as Goddess Laxmi. Devendra Kumar Jha, another artist, catches the romance thus:



Fig. 15: Krishna Radha Romance by Devendra Kumar Jha

Seen with his cloud blue complexion, Krishna serenades his well-attired sweetheart with white complexion with celestial melodies. The sweetheart listens enthralled. Even the birds are enchanted by the dulcet flute. The birds and the lotus lend this piece the contours of a *kohbar* painting.

The insistent message of the portrayal of the divine romance is love and devotion—the latter expected more from the wife as the following painting by Anshu Mithila shows:



Fig. 16: Lord Vishnu on a Reclining Pose on Seshnag by Anshu Mithila

A dexterous depiction with the help of both *kachani* (line-work) and *bharni* (filling-in with colours) styles, Anshu Mithila sketches Goddess massages Lord Vishnu's legs. The social meaning put across is that Maithili women should likewise serve their husbands in the evening when they come back home after gruelling work.

Thus Mithila kohbar painting catches the manifestations of the Devi in response to different requirements and times. The all-powerful feminine force assumes diverse forms, taking different avatars to fulfill diverse purposes in changed circumstances and time periods. Sometimes she is frightening and even vengeful, like Kali; often she is like Gauri, who as the nurturing mother figure constantly guides her husband to be generous and benevolent towards his devotees; an ideal daughter, wife, daughter-in-law, and a compassionate, forgiving mother figure like Sita; or a besotted beloved like Radha.

Yet patriarchal Mithila society, as the painting-portrayals of Draupadi in Mithila art show, wives can also be dominating:



Fig. 17: Draupadi's Disrobing

Fig. 17 depicts the infamous incident of Draupadi cheerharan (disrobing) in which the Pandavas are shown as being helpless after having lost the game of dice. She questions the Pandavas' act instead of submitting to what they want. She also questions the royal court as to why it is that when Yudhishtira has bet himself and lost the game, he has the right to still bet against her. This shows that in a predominant male society, Draupadi raises her voice. She argues and pleads to defend her honour several times. After the shameful incident of her attempted disrobing, the King has to apologize for his sons' disorderly conduct. The King's apology remains tantamount to the concessions by patriarchy.

The above kind subversive feminism is, however, considerably backgrounded in Mithila painting—a situation that underscores the fact that patriarchal Mithila society's of women is their tamed wifhood. This is why, markers of subversive Kali—Her yantra, her sexuality and Kamakhya-manifestation get entry into kohbar painting in a backgrounded manner. In the foreground is depicted wifhood with *suhaag* (marriage auspiciousness), fertility, and motherhood, and devotion— qualities exemplified in the Gauri manifestation of Hindu Cosmic Mother.

Chapter 4

Conclusion: Meaning of Kali Tamed as Gauri in Maithili Worldview

Kali and Gauri are respectively the untamed and domestic forms of Hindu Cosmic Mother. One is naked, and the other is fully dressed. One's hair is untied. The other's is tied with a string of flowers. One is wild and bloodthirsty. The other is gentle and nourishing. The former drinks blood; the latter gives milk.

Gauri, also known as Annapoorni, giver of food, is fair, dressed as a married woman in green sari with green bangles and hair tied in a knot with strings of flowers. In Gauri, sex and violence are contained to satisfy the needs of her family. She is nature domesticated. She is everything that the dark, naked, bloodthirsty Kali is not.

In the *tantrik* understanding of human physiology and which also informs of Maithili worldview, all living organisms possess seed that helps them procreate. Plants, animals and women shed their seed involuntarily during pollination, heat and menstruation. Kohbar painting dramatizes this cosmic drama. Woman as Shakti embodies energy. She can be as wild and fearsome as Kali or as gentle and affectionate as Gauri. She is the world Shiva shuts himself from. She stirs love in his heart, makes him open his eyes and be part of worldly life. Love connects the divine inside with the divine outside. The yearning and union that follow validates all of existence. As *kohbar* painting testifies, this non-duality—the melting of the spiritual into the secular and vice versa—lies at the core of Maithili way of life. Finally, the stress on Gauri Puja in *kohbar* painting is symbolic of the marriage of Shiva and Shakti, transforming both God and Goddess. When Kali steps on Shiva, *Shakti* is Kali, nature wild and untamed. Shiva is consciousness that is indifferent. When they marry, Kali becomes Gauri, nature that is nurturing and fertile. Shiva becomes Shankara, consciousness that is attentive. Maithil women want Shiva-like attention from their husbands.

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