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Reclaiming Mithila Women's Identity in Rani Jha's Selected Paintings

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By

Kamana Pokhrel

Symbol No.: 280683

T.U. Regd. No.: 9-2-108-95-2013

Central Department of English

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Letter of Recommendation

I am pleased to state that this research entitled “Reclaiming Mithila Women’s Identity in Rani Jha’s Selected Paintings” has been successfully completed under my supervision by Kamana Pokhrel in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in English. I would like to recommend this research be examined by an external examiner.

Dr. Raj Kishor Singh

Supervisor

Date:.....

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Kamana Pokhrel

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Abstract

This paper focuses on reclaiming Mithila women's identity keeping into consideration Rani Jha's five selected paintings: Changing Women, Together Tearing the Veil, Husband Leaving, Abortion Clinic and Two Women from the feminist perspective. Painting, in general, works as a piece of art through which one expresses ideas, opinions, and information. For Maithili women, paintings work as a tool for representation and recognition. Although women of the Mithila society are known for their prominence in artistic creativity, the prevalence of patriarchy has eclipsed women's identity and introduced artistry with the names of male figures. Maithili women do not take paintings merely as a decor tool but rather they have adopted the paintings to present the dominance of patriarchy that has been silencing the voice of women in society. Through her paintings, one can understand the reality of society and how women try to revolt against societal values. It focuses on the role of Mithila women to reclaim their identity so that they substantiate their position in society using Simone de Beauvoir's notion of females and Virginia Woolf's concept of the possibility of women's liberation. Reclamation of identity is a resistance to the domination of males in suppressing the position of women in Mithila society because males are used to snatching the assets of women and imposing their power. Amidst this oppression, for the projection of their aspirations paintings have been the significant apparatus to narrate their life through which they can liberate themselves, redeeming from the rupture of patriarchal preaching doctrines. Mithila painting, therefore, including Rani Jha's paintings, is a means through which Mithila women are revealing, representing, resisting, and reclaiming their position in society.

Keywords: Women's Identity, Patriarchy, Mithila, Painting, Resistance

Introduction

Mithila women are the creators of marvelous Mithila paintings. The painting culture, transmitted from generations back, has succeeded in occupying tremendous volume in the global market, illustrating the colorful dimension of the Mithila society. However, the painting, underneath the beautiful portrayal, encapsulates the dark secret of the social structure in which women reside as the meek and subordinated character, dominated by patriarchal Hindu males. The male-dominated Mithila society does not allow women to counter their prevailing notion, nor does the social structure support them for their liberation. Therefore, Mithila women deliberately choose painting as a means through which they create a fanciful world and narrate their life stories, revealing their pathetic situations.

Mithila painting, also known as Madhubani art, has a long history with its originality and cultural richness. The article entitled “Madhubani Painting,” published in *Cultural India*, describes, “As it is practiced in the Mithila region of Bihar and Nepal, it is called Mithila or Madhubani art. Often characterized by complex geometrical patterns, these paintings are known for representing ritual content for particular occasions, including festivals, religious rituals, etc” (np). The paintings carry their historical location and resemble the texture of the Mithila region. Hiroshi Ishii mentions, “Mithila (Mithila) is the name of a region bestraddling the northern part of the state of Bihar in India and southeastern Nepal; it is bordered on the south by the Ganges (Gahga), in the west by the Gandaki River, in the east by the Kosi River and in the north by the Churia (Siwalik) range of hills in southern Nepal” (37). The geographical access of Mithila art comprises double articulation; however, its value and significance, since its origin, do not vary to date. The origin, according to Anita Bhetwal, “[O]f Mithila art is rooted in the legend of King Janak ordering his

subjects to paint walls of homes to welcome Lord Ram when he came to ask for his daughter Sita's hand in marriage" (np). This ceremonial event paved the way for the development and proliferation of Mithila art that persist to date. The historicity of Rama and Sita not merely consolidated the relationship between Nepal and India but also initiated an artistic creation that became a shared ground to express Mithila's essence to both countries.

The painting has specified its artistic domain and cultural implication blurring the geographical demarcation; however, it has gone through crucible events in history to relegate its domain. According to Carolyn Henning, "For centuries the women have painted certain figures and designs on the walls of their mud homes for ceremonial occasions, particularly weddings and boys' sacred thread ceremonies" (719).

However, in course of time, the purpose, area, and scope of the Mithila painting have undergone changes. Brown further mentions, "In the 1960s they were encouraged to begin putting their art on paper in a laudable effort to bring new sources of income to an impoverished region of India and especially to its women" (719).

However, Bijeesh Budhathoki writes, "It was only after 1990, when the Panchayat regime ended, that this art form began garnering some appreciation and attention and was accepted as one of the Nepali folk arts" (np). Mithila art received recognition after the disintegration of the Panchayat regime and arose as a creative apparatus to decorate homes. Bhetwal claims, "As the art evolved, the paintings became more than a way to beautify homes — they provided women with a creative outlet to tell the stories of their lives." Women's dominance in the painting shows the creative aspects of Mithila women and their pivotal role to elevate and consolidate the cultural value of Mithila painting. Considering painting as a source of ways of expressiveness, they

celebrated art as a significant apparatus to regulate their livelihood and culture. Soma Ghosh assesses:

The process of painting has given a medium of expression to the women.

These women are natural artists and don't really follow any norms . . . The painting practice provides income and empowers women who also have a goal to empower others, which makes them aware of their rights and gives them the confidence to deal with other social issues. (np)

The high association of women in creating the art surpasses the supremacy of males and addresses women as imperative creatures to substantiate the artistic value of the Mithila paintings. KuhuKopariha argues, "Practiced solely by the women of the family, a matriarchal painting tradition thus emerged in a patriarchal society The aesthetic of these paintings overlaps across castes but the symbolic language of the art form and its themes are varied." The parochial value of art does not confine its territory within the principalities of an artistic domain, instead, it is associated with the culture, values, aesthetics, rituals, norms, and psychological instances of Mithila. Moreover, Claire Burkert writes, "[i]t might also be interpreted as acceptable means of expression for a woman within her assigned sphere of ritual and worship"(263). Therefore, artistic creation, indeed, now has become a form of women's expression of their livelihood, thoughts, and inner spirit.

Mithila's painting has captured a tremendous volume of popularity with the utmost monetary value these days; however, Chandra Shamsheer Bahadur claims, "The paintings are the exclusive monopoly of artists and their knowledge has been passed from generation to generation, from mothers to daughters" (np). The absence of males in designing paintings but women in the frontier position, amidst a suppressive environment, keenly reflecting their creativity through the paintings mark the

dominance of males in Mithila society. In this relevance, Soumya Mathew quotes Rani Jha's statement: "For over 1,500 years, women have lived oppressed lives, harboured suppressed desires. Unknowingly, women see themselves channelizing their repressed thoughts (of freedom) through the songs they sing and paintings they make for recreation" (np). Women have grasped paintings and singing as the means to express the desires which were squashed by society and were asked to bind themselves within the demure characteristics.

The patriarchal society—prevalent in the Mithila society—has defined women in its own ideological contentment which has dominantly confiscated the autonomy of women. They are circumscribed within the homely atmosphere, subordinating the major roles of the house. According to Coralynn Davis, "In Maithil patrilineal and patrilocal ideology and practice, a family's in-married women are not meant to be at the service of those outsidings of the household except as agricultural laborers in the fields owned by better-off and generally higher-caste households in their husbands'" (213). Women have to ask permission for participating in agricultural sectors and extraneous households in case negative comments regarding a woman are passed across households. In addition, Davis notes, "[s]uch talk is bad enough, and can lead to social conflict, but beyond that is the possibility that rumors of this sort will harm the honor (ijjat) of a household and thus put at risk the marriageability of the sons and daughters of that household" (213). It resembles the cultural attitudes accustomed in the Mithila society undeviatingly relating individual freedom to the status and image of the family. Outgoing restrictions, most importantly, for women bound them to remain aloof from the outer world and suppress their desire within.

This research paper, therefore, focuses on the Mithila women—who are subordinated by the male dominant society—taking Rani Jha's five selected paintings:

Changing Women; Together Tearing the Veil; Husband Leaving; Abortion Clinic and Two Women, into consideration and claims that women, though they are suppressed, have got their outlet to rescue their repressed desire through their paintings. The paintings are not merely a piece of art but rather carry specific meanings with profound sensibility and the tale of the Mithila women. They are reclaiming their identity through the paintings and substantiating their position in their society. Using Judith Butler's notion of "gender as performativity" as a major theoretical lens, the paper argues women as in the role of males and vice versa in terms of painting. The research deals with Rani Jha's painting and it strives to analyze Mithila society through the feminist perspective, unraveling the politics behind the articulation of women's life narration in the paintings.

Painting is an artwork that significantly varies across society and these discrepancies do embrace their own cultural codes. Since culture is a continuous process of human beings, so is artistic production. According to Noel Carroll, "Although every known culture appears to possess art, it is improbable that this can be explained in terms of art's originating in a single location at one time and then being disseminated gradually therefrom" (95). Carroll's pretension illuminates the impossibility of tracing the origin of art and its fixities in terms of time. In defining the proliferation and the impact of art, he further claims, "Rather, art seems to have sprung up independently in different locales and at different times, often apart from outside influences" (95). From his definition, a very palpable aspect of art is clear that artistic creation has a nexus with the culture and the artistic production keeps on producing without any further influences.

Artwork adopting the cultural code does have certain motifs to be presented. This complex composition of arts has integrated meaning to be disseminated. In the

words of Michael Polanyi, “[W]orks of art are generally formed through integration of two incompatible elements, one of these being an attempted communication and the other, an artistic structure that contradicts the communication” (669). Polanyi’s proposition exclaims that the binomial function of art contradictorily works as a communicative process distorting secondarily through the depiction. To be more precise, art communicates but simultaneously brings artistic structure in the frontier so it distorts the communicative meaning. In other words, the artistic structure manipulates the communicative meaning of art, or the meaning is not the same as the artwork literally possesses. Continuing the argument Polanyi further argues, “The harmonious compound formed by these two elements has qualities found neither in nature nor in human affairs, and hence it can communicate no information about real facts. But it can draw on our unorganized memories and embody them in its own structure, evoking thereby deep emotion in us” (669). Polanyi’s argument sounds a bit peculiar or odd in terms of the function of art. But the point is art does not merely function as we generally expect. Normally, human beings try to search for their personal experience in the artwork. Art creates a different world and drags us to its realm evoking deep emotions in us.

The creation of a different world is the magic of the creator. The painter with the brush and color draws a beautiful canvas where the human imagination lies. In doing so, Duke Madenfort argues, “The painter solves the many problems of artistic creation by proceeding according to the generalized rules of art itself” (9). Following the guidelines of painting, an artist resolves the intricacies of art. A significant thing to be noticed is that painting or art is not a simple task, but rather a complex work, guided by principles and demands a high level of comprehension. Moreover, Madenfort further argues, “The painting, regardless of style or period, is basically a

visual scheme of formal relations governed largely by principles of balance and organic unity, rules of color harmony and line variation, and laws of association between colors, lines, and shapes on the one hand, and emotional responses on the other” (9-10). The elements associated to form a painting do have their specific meaning and task and these works are carefully considered by the artist to omit the possible violation of the rules.

The art produced from this sincerity is not merely a production of photographic images with important meaning but a different metaphysics that encapsulates the deep essence of a human being. This potency of art can bring a drastic change in human beings. According to Charles: “Art can be an incredible catalyst for connection as its influence reaches beyond the realms of conversation, and creates a medium that communicates in all languages, wherein humans can share an experience together, and express themselves through their reactions and feelings as observers, and through the art itself as a creator” (np). The power of art has the capability to surpass the limit of human conversation creating its own language, own space, and its own realm inviting people to enjoy the space made by the art. A more important aspect is that human beings create art with their creativity, but since it is created it becomes autonomous and starts creating its own space. However, the message of the artist is always infused with the art where different meanings are located within the artistic creation. In these remarks, a significant question must be what art does. And what art is? To answer these questions, Hemant Ishek’s words are relevant and necessary to discuss. As he claims:

Art is a way to express many things. It's a way to deal with feelings that cannot be expressed through typical means like conversation or words. Art gives a way to express your emotions. . . . These days art is not only just a way

of expressing your ideas but also has been used to send some kind of information or message to the masses. (np)

Art is, in fact, a medium of sharing, expressing, and disseminating one's ideas, emotions and information. Through the creation of beauty, art has the capability to motivate, inspire, and convey a message to humankind. As "Importance of Art in Human Life", further, argues, "Art can be used for politics and social agendas such as editorial cartoons and paintings directed at political or religious figures. Art can inspire and allow people to see things from different perspectives." When it comes to art it subtly makes things visible with powerful instances. In a similar instance, Mithila paintings hold the power to let the people visage reality that has been prevalent in society.

Mithila paintings are the sole production of the female. The women residing in the Mithila region strive to input their life structure in the painting and replicate their situation to narrate their pathetic condition in terms of recognition, representation, and repercussion. After all, Mithila society is guided by the hierarchical model where women are the most vulnerable figures. More importantly, the Mithila society is fragmented because of caste and gender which paves the way for social inequality. Claire Burkert claims, "Maithil castes are divided among the four main varna categories: Brahman, Kshastha, Vaishya, and Shudra" (257). And these categories of people are not equal in the social domain but rather largely asymmetric in terms of the distribution of power.

To be more precise, these divisions have not only created a demarcation among the groups of people but also created a certain social institution that has given nonuniform power and derived people into further categories. According to Richard Burghart, "In the former category one finds Maithils from the so-called 'big' castes:

the Maithil Brahmins who are guardians of Sanskrit knowledge, the Bhumihar Brahmins who are the traditional landlords of Mithila and the Kayastha scribes who kept the accounts and revenue records for the Bhumihars” (367). These so-called higher castes are the privileged group that creates a dichotomy with the so-called lower caste of the Mithila. As Burghart further asserts:

In the later category are the so-called ‘little’ castes who comprise the touchable servant and artisan castes, such as the Cowherders (the most populous caste of Mithila), Blacksmiths, Watercarriers and Barbers; and the untouchable servant and artisan castes, such as the Oilpressers, Palanquin bearers, Cobblers, Washermen and Sweepers. (368)

The social division composed of ‘big’ and ‘little’ castes is not merely a system representation but also an informal institution that has contributed to segregating society. It also has played a pivotal role in consolidating the ‘big’ caste and deteriorating the status of the ‘little’ caste.

The informal institution works as the formal structure that creates distinct images of the Mithila society. The social structure formed by the informal structure breaks the oneness or the organic unity of the Mithila society because Mithila seems to be a particular and independent group. More significantly, while defining the Mithila art and culture this division plays a prominent role. To recall Claire Burkert, “When the culture of Mithila is explained to those either in or outside the culture (e.g. “all Maithil women create aripans with rice paste on the floor”) or when the culture is presented at political events or cultural programs, the image put forth is of high caste culture” (261). These high-caste people primarily take the advantage of the work or to be more precise, as Burkert further claims, “[I]t is these high-caste forms which define his culture” (261). It shows that the attention grabbed by the Mithila culture,

art, and tradition is credited to the high-caste people. According to Burghart, “This hierarchical organization of space in which centre is real and the perimeter a pale imitation is sustained in the territorial distribution of castes” (372). In this scenario, he further argues, “Of all the ‘big’ castes, Maithil Brahmins have had the most influence in defining the style prosody of chaste Maithil and perpetuating its form and literature” (372). The role of the high caste is dominantly defining the Mithila society and in so doing the lower caste is boycotted from every opportunity they deserve.

The social dichotomy in terms of caste is one of the aspects that segregate Mithila society. Moreover, religion is another instance that distorts social harmony. According to Kul Bahadur Rana writes, “Mithila, a Hindu society, has the influence of patriarchal Vedantic civilization. The society observes Hindu religious practices and rituals, on the one hand, and develops its own faith, beliefs and value systems on the other hand that at times tend to contrast with the religious practices of the Indian subcontinent” (74). This patriarchal domination works as a mechanism that subdues the voices of women. In the words of Pallavi Payal:

In particular, women face deeper discrimination due to the patriarchal system society. In many cases, discrimination against women is embedded in subtle ways in society, and several superstitions and strong beliefs are attached to it. Many traditional rituals, therefore, perpetuate gender biases, discrimination, and even violence against women. (np)

The practice of Hindu culture that endorses patriarchy is one of the primary causes that make women contingent in Mithila society. Therefore, to overcome the stress of the intricate nexus of patriarchy, I argue that Mithila women take painting as an means of building their identity as the women, in the paintings, illustrate the livelihood of the society, portraying their tale, mostly, to narrate their situations. In

Mithila Art: History and its Evolution, according to KabitLabh, “The art form has always been unique in its capability of incorporating social values and cultural existence along with decoration and creativity. It stands as the voice of rural women in a patriarchal society” (np). The Mithila painting is not merely a piece of art but also a bulk articulation of ritual and cultural assets of the Mithila society which is dominated by males.

The Mithila culture is well known for the paintings it produces but one particular aspect of it is that the Brahmin males are found to be defining it. Women being a producer are deprived of being recognized as producers. This is a major instance that is problematizing the position of women and the problem is not because Mithila women are really inferior but rather they are the secondary character of society. In this regard, according to Simone de Beauvoir, “The term ‘female’ is pejorative not because it roots women in nature, but because it confines her to her sex, and if this sex, even in an innocent animal, seems despicable an enemy to man, it is obviously because of the disquieting hostility women triggers in him” (21). The subordination of women is itself problematic that naturally subjugates them from the dominant arena. Therefore, in relevance to the current study, one can suppose, for the identification of their work of art, Mithila women reclaim their identities through their paintings.

Through their artistic creativity, they have been fundamentally overturning the male-created hierarchy and also reflecting their power to redefine gender. Since gender is a matter of performativity, to borrow from Butler, in terms of artistic creativity in Mithila, females should be male and vice versa because the entire Mithila paintings are the products of females. According to Judith Butler, “[G]ender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is

an identity tenuously constituted in time -an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (519). And further explaining the institutional discourse she argues, “[G]ender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (519). In the Butlerian sense, gender is not a fixed identity but rather a transient aspect of the human body that persistently keeps on changing. The performance of a body determines gender instead of an innate definition.

However, the Mithila society is not yet mature enough to celebrate these facts. Instead, society captures the essence of patriarchy and women are expected to adhere to the rules and regulations structured by them. These are the bitter realities of Mithila society that Mithila women are expected to follow. The pathetic situations of the women are unheard so these bitter truths are dispersed in their canvas.



Fig. 1. Women inside the four walls

Figure 1 illustrates a woman, in cultural attire, who is confined to a small space performing numerous tasks. Her performances, through the eyes around her, are being watched, and also the color of the surrounding area seems to be faded away. To examine it critically, the small space signifies the narrow area into which patriarchal-guided society keeps women forcefully. Similarly, the eyes around her are of those orthodoxical men who consider women as a machine and always to be kept in a subordinated position. They are under the surveillance of the patriarchal gaze. Moreover, the faded color in the painting depicts the real picture of society and also claims that women are not happy with the position they have in society.

Even though women conduct the task obstructing their personal aspirations, they have never been accepted as the ones who conserve the culture and always place societal needs at the top. This can even be understood as the prevalence of the patriarchal notion in Maithil society. As Abeda Sultana claims, “[D]ue to patriarchy, women were deprived of their legal rights and opportunities patriarchal values restrict women’s mobility, reject their freedom over themselves as well as their property” (7). Men deliberately force women to place their attention elsewhere rather than on the upliftment of their personal traits.

The only space provided to women is home but even their men have established an atmosphere that is more equivalent to gifting a rose with sharp thorns on it. It is a male who has formed two spaces: private and public, and they choose the public sphere for themselves but still impose rules in the private sphere to keep the female in control. The lives of Mithila women are under surveillance, physically and psychologically. Indeed, the restrictions for women are the prescription may be; however, the cultural codes and the prevailing notion disseminated by the patriarchal males are the ultimate barriers to the liberation of Mithila women. The social doctrine

through which Mithila society describes the norms and values to instigate Mithila women for regulating social reality, the code itself has become the major obstacle to ultimately redeeming the marginalized, women.



Fig. 2. Husband Leaving

The literal aspects of Figure 2 demonstrate a tragic situation when a man is leaving his home, perhaps for outdoor work, where his wife is left alone at home with a small daughter. The facial expression of the woman exposes her grief and agony in her husband's departure. Moreover, the position of the woman's hand and object on the hand of a woman, in the painting, perhaps can be comprehended as a sign of love that woman has preserved, and now as her husband is setting his journey outside the home she is handing it to him as a token of love. Through this, a woman's devotion to their husband can be clarified despite the fact that the male keeps women in a subordinated position.

While narrating the women's stories in the picture, the artist satirizes the social structures of Mithila society. The women who are considered the caretaker of

the house are anchored with the trifling things along with enormous burdens. The entire household is under the work of women confines them to the homely periphery, restricting them from access to the outer world. The deliberate selection of colors on the woman's side in figure 2, which is less colorful than that of the man's side, reflects the colorlessness of women's life. Here, I am arguing colorlessness in comparison to the male's color. The flowery ground and highlighted colors in red and yellow are emphasized on the man's side denoting that the life of a man is more splendid than that of a woman.

Although naturally males and females are similar creatures and they deserve equal recognition, social and cultural practices unequally treat these creatures. These treatments, provided to males and females, show significant distinctions between them. With these inequalities there germinates the hierarchy ever serves the powerful group, that is male. According to DraganaVilic:

Despite the principled equality of women with men, women are often faced in their career with invisible barriers that inhibit their progress and occupy key positions in public life - unequal opportunities for employment, stereotypes about weak managerial skills of women, lack of female role models, exclusion of women from informal networks and etc. (51)

Dragana explains that the inequality prevalent in society channels the social structure that provides the male with the utmost opportunity, leading them to the frontier. A similar narration of the Mithila society has been illustrated in figure 2. The male character in the picture is awarded the opportunity to roam outside the house where the female character has been chained by the household work.

Moreover, the selection of color and the outline drawn on the canvas has a significant meaning because they have extended meaning from the cultural definition

of the Mithila culture. According to Kul Bahadur Rana mentions, “Varieties of forms, colors, graphic patterns, and symbols used in the paintings bridges the gap between the material and spiritual world and enables both the artists and the viewers to realize the cosmic consciousness” (75). The symbolic meaning of the painting embedded with a different level of interpretation exposes the inner truth of the Mithila society.



Fig. 3. Changing Women

The explicit message of figure 3 takes the painting toward the line of interpretation which delivers about the consistent devotion of women in their work even though they are in distinct stages of their life. The work most probably can be a painting and the use of multiple colors here depicts the mirthful instances in their life. Through the projection of four women, the painting delivers four distinct stages of a woman's life in four different colors. The color has been more vibrant as a woman reaches a different stage of their life. The changing of color, including the portrait of the transitional woman, to its darker form depicts firm determination, devotion, and

development with the passage of time. Moreover, the presence of small ladies at the bottom of the painting can be interpreted as the passing of the value of the painting in the life of Mithila women.

Along with the passage of the message, they are also taught the importance and how they are supposed to express their ideas, emotions, and information through the paintings. We can see a girl at the bottom of the last woman turning right and this expects us to internalize that she is learning how to paint by looking at the mother figure. Marking the prominence of painting in a woman's life also reveals the absence of Mithila men in the promotion of the essential instance that the painting carries in the Mithila people. This even enables us to understand that the artist is attempting to illustrate through the artwork that women are taught about the culture they live in from an early age and are obligated to remain in the specified peripheral. The odor of suffocation that the women in the paintings must endure is very palpable. Changes in the clothing and decorations of the ladies depicted in the picture show how cultural ornaments are used as a tool to confine women as they mature and enter different stages of life.

Women near the front of the line, for instance, have fewer cultural accouterments than the women next to them. Similar to that, the clothing has been adorned with a selection of unique colors and patterns. Women's endorsement in the cultural ornaments symbolizes the pathetic condition in which women have to live their life. The artist through the painting pictures the subordinating cultural codes of women in Mithil culture.

The social and cultural value of the Mithila society constantly overshadows the position of women. According to Coralynn Davis, "Maithil society is strongly patrilineal and patrilocal" (213). It means the linearity of the generation has no chance

of women's superiority. In this, Davis further mentions, "Lineages are traced through men, and upon marriage, women (girls) are transferred to the homes of their grooms, who often and ideally live in extended family households organized multigenerationally around brothers, their wives and children (and those male children's wives, children, etc.)" (213). Since a woman gets married, she becomes a benevolent recipient of her male counterparts. Moreover, after getting married, women are loaded with additional cultural codes. For instance, according to Meena Acharya:

The high value attached to sexual purity has also resulted in a strict Pardah (keeping the face covered for a woman in her affinal household). Pardah is also a sign of respect shown to male affines. A young bride in her affinal household is expected to observe strict Pardah and not to show her face to the elder man of her household or male villagers in general. She should not appear before any male stranger, nor should she raise her voice. (30)

The value system added to women does not allow them to live their independent life, they are supposed to accept the instruction provided by the male. Even more, women are not merely under the dominance of their counterparts but also of the elders and the general men of society. This resembles that women are the least recognized creature of the Mithila society who is to respect every male.

Moreover, the independence that the male observes is wider than that of women. According to Acharya, "If a man does not like his wife, he may decide to marry again without any loss of social prestige, caste standing, excess to property, rights of inheritance. But women's inheritance rights, social and ritual status and their excess to property all depend on her being attached to her specific male" (43).

Although marriage is the most important aspect of Mithila society, even in these

obliged cultural values, women are vulnerable, and males are relegated to boundless freedom. The role of women in the Maithil society is to stay inside the homely periphery abiding by the guidelines of a male character. They have no access to the outer world. Their only companions are the instruments they are accustomed to in their household or other women who are in similar oppressions.



Fig. 4 'Two Women' — Exploring companionship

Figure 4 depicts the confined situation of the women in the Mithila society. In an explicit manner, the painting pictures women talking to each other while sitting on the base of a window. Additionally, the woman is seen to be fulfilling her duty of taking care of her son while spending time with her friends. Analyzing the embedded meaning in the painting, the window depicts a narrow space and it represents the position of the women of Mithila culture. The women of Mithila culture have to stay within the confined border accepting them as the subordinate character. In a similar instance, the presence of color in an exterior space is darker than that of the wall inside, where women have stayed to share their feelings. Moreover, the cultural attire

that the women have been wearing signifies that the culture is vibrant but women of the culture are integrated to live a life of colorlessness. They are considered subservient beings in the culture. The women in the picture, noticeably, are depicted as bigger, which defines their boundless pleasure in sharing their views with another woman. Additionally, even though women are enjoying the time and sharing their feelings they are obliged to perform their duty of looking after their children. The tragic part is the same child playing on the lap of the mother who will be an adult will be the leading figure of society and will give continuation to the patriarchy. The symbolic meaning of the painting hints at the societal behavior of the Mithila society where the women are given very few spaces to address themselves.

However, the painting is a vehement representation of solidarity among women themselves. The picture is a representation of interconnectedness between women, defining how their bodies are formidably conjoined. Moreover, these paintings are not merely projections and narrations of Mithila women but also a form of resistance that implicitly blows the air of agitation through art. The performativity of the art directs the position of women and demands what is actually needed. But, even this painting has been shifting in course of time. Before, the cultural representation of Mithila painting with its distinct features in terms of artistic creation, graphs, character, color, and articulation was confined within the realm of the Mithila region. During this time, the painting was credited to women. But after the proliferation of the painting in the global arena the entire scenario got shifted. In this regard, Claire Burkert argues, “As soon as the male power elite understood that the project’s promotion of Maithili art had an aim of empowering women and not to the promotion of men, they needed to claim that what was traditionally the women’s was not the women’s after all” (269). Furthermore, she claims, “These men claimed, then,

that the women lost their tradition and the men recovered it, and now they were the champion of artistic preservation” (270). Until and unless the painting was limited within the homely boundaries, males were out of the practical discourse. But since the promotion got initiated they started adopting the credit. This shows that men are unable to produce the cultural product but they never waste their time to be accredited. Not only do the painting project women are ahead, but they are also on the frontier in other empowering works as well. However, there are different challenges that push them to surrender. The social rules, laws, cultural codes, norms, and values set by the patriarchal dogma, to name a few, sidelines them from the opportunities they are capable of. For the opportunities, a painter like Rani Jha seems to be articulating these issues in their artistic creation. Her work of art resembles the words of Virginia Woolf: “[A] woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that, as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction unsolved” (7-8). As Woolf asks for a room that symbolizes freedom and money which is empowerment, Jha’s painting also protests against the patriarchal domain and demands women’s empowerment. These instances are overwhelmingly visible in figure no. 5.



Fig. 5. Abortion Clinic

Through the picturization of figure 5, it is transparent that the artist is trying to illustrate the occurrence of women's empowerment in Mithila culture. Through the portrayal of the doctor and nurses, we can demonstrate the change in the position of women in Mithila culture. Soumya Mathew writes, “The painting ‘Abortion Clinic’ depicts the doctor as more venomous than a cobra. Women undergo abortions, mostly forced because of the preference for a male child, at the cost of Rs 5,000, according to Rani” (np). One, in the painting, can visage women performing their duties and responsibilities. Moreover, the decorative border lines symbolically represent the acquaintance of liberation, freedom, and honor even after living in subordination imposed by the patriarchal society. It can also be comprehended as a picturization of the victory of women groups.

Women in Mithila culture had to endure pathetic situations to survive their lives. They occasionally were reminded about the difference between private and public spaces. However, the influence of women in the public sphere depicts their

triumph against the male-created patriarchal norms. The hands that were forced to utilize and preserve domestic utensils are now accustomed to modern equipment and are working as a curer not only for a family but variant families. Similarly, the choice of color to paint the paintings projects lively energy.

The pictures above are the representation of Mithila society, particularly the narration of women's condition. Or in other words, the paintings are the narration of the tale of women from Mithila. But in a critical sense, these paintings are a form of energy that tries to disrupt the male dominant society. The women painters and the issue illustrated in the pictures are more concerned about suffocation in society. Bringing social issues Jha, in the painting, has brought social inequality in a naked form. In doing so, since women are the pillar of the household, though they are socially and culturally dominated by males, Jha seems to be accounted for repositioning and redefining the situation of women. The women's bodies are taken as the inferior material to decorate the house in the Mithila society which has been ruptured by the painters. In this sense, Jha is a mouthpiece through which she is dispersing the hidden secret of the painting itself. She seems to claim that females are not contingent beings by birth rather they are made inferior through cultural coding. Actually, as Judith Butler claims, "The problem is not that the feminine is made to stand for matter or for universality; rather, the feminine is cast outside the form/matter and universal/particular binarisms. She will be neither the one nor the other, but the permanent and unchangeable condition of both—what can be construed as a non-metrizable materiality" (16). It is not the work of males to define women, because they have understood women merely from men's perspective. And more importantly, the male's gaze is always from their vantage point with a certain motif.

To illustrate these realities Rani Jha has taken painting as a mode of representation through which she is constantly reclaiming the Mithila women's identity. Although according to Davis, "Jha's portrayal of the painters as illiterate, simple-minded, and gullible is part and parcel of a general Maithil discourse of gender that upholds the relation of dependency of women on and vulnerability of women to men and their patriline" (221), in a deep sense, the representation of the culture itself is a representation of reality. As Joseph A. Schumpeter says, "If a doctor predicts that his patient will die presently, this does not mean that he desires it" (61), similarly if Jha's painting depicts the vulnerable condition of women then it never means she desires it. Instead, to represent is to voice, to represent is to highlight, and more subtly to represent is to reveal. Therefore, Jha, to be more specific, is countering the patriarchal society through the painting. Women who are taken as the subordinate character of society are not to be bound by the walls of the patriarchal society. Their quality defines their identity and their role determines their gender. In terms of artistic creation, males are the subordinate character and females are the leading figure. However, women are relegated to a marginal position, undermining their potentiality and prowess. In this pathetic domain of Mithila society, Rani Jha's painting is working as a significant apparatus to resist prevalent domination and underpin their weaker position. To be more specific, the painting itself is the process of claiming women's position whereas the hidden meanings, indeed, are the powerful articulation of reclaiming the position of Mithila women. With the reclamation, it has also been a weapon for women to express their freedom. Moreover, it holds the voice of Mithila women.

The idea of Mithila paintings is thought to have originated during the reign of King Janak, who had commanded people to decorate their homes to welcome Lord

Ram on the occasion of his daughter, Sita, wedding. The paintings created have not just been utilized for adornment; with time, they evolved into a means for Mithila women to voice their opinions, thoughts, and experience. More significantly, they use the paintings to critique the prevailing patriarchal conventions through the artworks because the society is not aloof from patriarchal domination. The painting, over time, has become a way of narration, a means of resistance, and apparatus to consolidate their position.

Indeed, the paintings have cultural, religious, and historical significance; it has, in addition, several others, including these, functions that have become the undeniable purpose for the painting. It is not to argue that they are lacking traditional interest, as they used to hold, in painting these days, they are more revered to articulate their real position through colorful portraits, instead.

The life of Mithila is as colorful as the portrait; nevertheless, the question is whose life? Undoubtedly, the life of Mithila men is colorful. They are the ones who have access to multiple facilities, their days are mosaic, and their deeds are valued. It will be our hasty generalization if we comprehend the life of women as colorful as the portraits they prepare because men profit from the work that women prepare. To be precise, they do not claim it as the women's work but rather enjoy the proliferation that is obtained from the work exactly in a way people enjoy the hard work of the bee. Women are not able to reject rigidity directly therefore they are in need of the implicit agency. Their paintings are the implicit agency that picturizes the colorfulness of the Mithila society with the colorlessness of Mithila women.

In conclusion, to picture how it feels to live in the patriarchy, Mithila women exercise their creativity to represent society through paintings. As the depiction of artworks has evolved, the projection of women's life stories has become an agency

through which they can protest. Rani Jha's paintings have reflected the hidden truth of Mithila society. The representation of women in the paintings is colorful; however, they are internally shallow pictures of the colorless life of Mithila women.

Importantly, the representation of demystified colorful pictures is not merely a literal articulation of Mithila women but also a sturdy force through which they disrobe the outer fabric of the social structure. In this sense, Rani Jha's purpose to represent Mithila women in the painting is to reveal, resist and relocate their real position.

Indeed, Mithila women are suppressed from their autonomy and liberty by Hindu patriarchal males. They cannot overtly resist prevalent social dogma. Therefore, they, including Rani Jha, have chosen to endeavor to unmask the Mithila society's hidden occurrences, and in so doing, they are reclaiming their position in their society.

Through the paintings, Mithila women are critiquing the standards of men residing in society in which paintings have become a means to rebuke the toxic masculinity prevalent in Mithila society. In doing so, Rani Jha's paintings have not merely played a role in portraying the Mithila painting culture but, meanwhile, also giving voice to the voiceless.

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