

Summary of the Thesis

**The women artists of early 20th.century Bengal, their spaces of
visibility, contributions and the indigenous modernism**

Aparna Roy Baliga

Supervisor

Dr.Shailendra. K.Kushwaha

Department of Art history and Aesthetics

The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda

A dissertation submitted to

The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda

For the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in

Art history and Aesthetics

Department of Art history and Aesthetics

Faculty of Fine Arts

The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda

Vadodara

2015

Summary

The objective of the thesis is to document and study the works of women artists in early 20th century Bengal and understand the underlying structure of modernism: the idea of modernism as a colonial trope and the counter colonial interpretation of modernism. Modernism became a contested domain and the centre of this discourse was woman. Hence there is an attempt to present a genderized art historical intervention which tries to rethink the ideas of art and aesthetics of this period. There are significant documentations of early 20th cent. women writers but there is an absence of such endeavor in art historical writings. Thus this effort aims to place them not as a tokenist presence but as an intervention that will bring a rupture in the linear narrative of early twentieth century art writings and their interpretations.

The word *women* is not used to emphasize the difference or create any category ,it does not aim to look for the essential idea of womanhood-'but for signs of femininity's structurally conditioned and dissonant struggle with phallogocentrism, a struggle with the already existing, historically specific definitions and changing dispositions of the terms Man and Woman within sexual difference'.¹ Regarding the women's question one's search begins with the nationalist ideologies itself. What constructs it becomes important. The nationalist

¹ Griselda Pollock, Thinking about women artists, Differencing the Canon, Feminist Desire and writing of Art's histories,p.33

resolution brought about a separation in the domain of culture into two spheres -- --the material i.e. *bahir* and the spiritual i.e. *ghar*. Along with the redefining of *ghar* i.e. the home the concept of new women or '*bhadramahila*' was also being defined in a new way. This idea of new women was situated at such a position which not only contrasted the westernized modern women but also was different from the traditional Indian woman imagined by the indigenous tradition of patriarchy.

Thus the spaces of femininity which Pollock talks about while she discusses Mary Cassat and Berthe Morisot, is in a paradoxical position. It is called the inner domain or *antarmahal*. It is referred to as '*antarmahal*' i.e. the inner or spiritual domain of mind and it is no more the excluded other. It was glorified as the unspoilt domain where the ideas of progress could proliferate in *swadeshi* terms. It led to the opening up of these spaces to the larger narration of the nation. The *alpona*, *kantha* which belonged essentially to this domain was incorporated to imagine *swadeshi* (Nationalist) aesthetics. . Hence it can be observed that the difference is being resolved and the act of appropriation of the feminine becomes important. The discussions on Indian aesthetics is replete with female metaphors, the *grihalaxmi* and the *kala laxmi* becomes the same. The idea of feminine in this context doesn't create a difference but reformulates the understanding of masculinity. It destabilizes the concept of masculinity and undoes the myth of essentialised femininity which is in opposition to masculinity. Hence the discussion on the women and art also aim at investigating the

representations of women by the male artists from the historical moment of early 20th century, it becomes a revision of the representational strategies by the male artists speaking of the titillatory aesthetics which frames the women as objects of desire and not subjects. Not only the images but the texts which are written on art tries to rearticulate the ideas of Indian Aesthetics as an anti-colonial discourse are replete with female metaphors.

These texts are being brought together to investigate the rules of formation of these texts. The questions which are being asked is how the documents are being used and what kind of truism is being written in the text. These art writings are trying to frame the grand narrative of Indian aesthetics as part of the Nationalist project of cultural hegemony. Though at moments there are transcendence of this 'greenhouse of historicism that was built in the name of nationalism around these art practioners'² through the Santiniketan art movement which also talks about internationalism. The ideas of tradition,modernity and gender becomes complex. The idea of indigenous modernism or contextual modernism as R.Shiva Kumar mentions becomes important. He puts forth-' A different model for indigenous modernism was discovered by Nandalal Bose in Ajanta painting and in the related sculptural traditions of India, which were given a wide berth by Abanindranath who found them foreign to his sensibility. Nandalal, who was

² R.Shivakumar, Santiniketan :A community of Artists and ideas, Indian Art an overview ,Gayatri Sinha(ed.),p.70

drawn to a less intimist and a more socially oriented practice of art favoured Ajanta and the sculptural traditions as opposed to the courtly Mughal miniatures, found traditional Indian art monumental and robustly plastic on the one hand and intrinsically decorative on the other. Decorative being for him essentially a linguistic quality, as in traditional Indian art, rather than a functional feature, the new art while eschewing the terminologies of Western realism allowed him to retain the facility for combining representation and decoration at scales ranging from that of folio painting to mural decoration.³

Thus this destabilizes the idea of the monolithic understanding of the word modern. Modernism is associated with the ideas of cultural and intellectual progress that marginalizes or excludes the non-western culture on the pretext of its non-progressiveness. Colonialism is also aligned to the project of modernity which also became a reason for introductions of reforms in the social practices of the colonized. This project of colonial modernity was contested by the anti-colonial projects through their own attempts of reformations and thus appeared the contextual modernism which was defined in the indigenous terms by looking at the classical past, the domain of the folk and based on the environmental response and contextual relevance.

³ R. Shivakumar, Indigenous modernism in Bengal, A few Facets, Catalogue essay of the exhibition titled 'Indigenous modernism in Bengal ,A few Facets' at Birla Academy of Art and culture, March 2006

These discussions are also investigations in the discourses of Post-colonial feminism which helps to understand the women's social roles, the complexity of the concept of femininity and sexuality and the agency of women which were 'recast' under colonial modernity primarily by the reformation project of the colonisers. ⁴There is an attempt to understand the widened sphere of the visibility of the women artists: the opening up of institutional spaces for art education and other public domains like the journals and exhibitions. There is a nuanced shift from the object of desire and ridicule to that of the professionals and politically aware women artists who participated in the anticolonial project of redefining the '*swadeshi* aesthetics.'

This thesis is not about the tokenist inclusion of the women artists who did 'sometimes exceed or violate the prescriptions of a particular set of ideologies, precisely because they are members of a dominant group.'⁵ Their position can be rightly defined in this context by what Dipesh Chakravorty says --- 'Elite and dominant groups can also have subaltern pasts to the extent that they participate in life worlds subordinated by the major narratives of the dominant institutions.'⁶

This is an attempt to intervene in the structural sexism of the discipline of

⁴ Rajeswari Sunder Rajan and You –me Pak, Post colonial feminism/Postcolonialism and feminism, A companion to Post Colonial studies ed. Henry Schwarz and Sangeeta Ray, p.61

⁵ Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, Introduction, Recasting women: Essays in Indian Colonial History, p.18

⁶ Dipesh Chakravorty, Minority Histories to Subaltern Pasts, Minority Histories, Provincialising Europe, Oxford University Press, 1ST Published in India in 2001 p-101

traditional/ mainstream art history and bring forth the underlying sexual difference produced by the interconnecting series of social practices and institutions which include families, education and art studies.

The First Chapter **Institutionalization of women's education in Bengal in the context of colonial and anti-colonial power relations** attempts to contextualize the

women's art education in the nationalist context of early 20th century India.

Nationalism was a dual concept. It became a political movement in one hand

challenging the supremacy of the colonial power and on the other hand it

became a cultural project. The colonizers viewed the condition of women in India

as indicative of degenerate native cultures. Hence some steps were taken by the

colonizers to improve the condition of women like introducing them to the formal

educational system, this also became a pretext of colonialization. This colonial

initiative was perceived as an intrusion by the nationalists. The nationalists found

a different pattern of education for women based on the idea of indigenous

identity formation. Nationalism as an idea thus became extremely gendered. The

most important fact is that prior to this phase of reformation there are references

to female education but the question was not politicized. The references are of

formal education and non-formal education. The domain of knowledge was

highly male and brahminical. Women's education was related to the *grihasutras*.

Griha or home became an important aspect of female education. Education

became one of the most important sphere of the reformist movement taken up

by the new elites. The form of education system prior to the institutionalized efforts

were informal:it was in the form of *zenana* education. *Vashanvis* would come to impart education to the women of the *zenana* . This was the state of women's education which was informal in nature. But in the colonial context it was a problem on which huge debates took place. The colonial period looked at the entire phenomenon of the prevalent (informal) educational system as irrational and irrelevant, not based on any scientific rationale but highly metaphysical in nature. In 1813 the company's concern for establishing education system in India became important. The pioneering attempt in the field of women's education can be considered to be initiated by the Christian missionaries who had established the first girl's school in Calcutta, The Juvenile School, in 1820 to be followed by others. But their schools, because of their Christian inclination was disliked by a class of *bhadraloks*. Soon schools were being founded by indigenous patronage as the accusation was of drifting of the women away from homely duties. This chapter mainly focuses on Sister Nivedita—her emphasis on female education/search for a nationalist and feminine curriculum. She found the Ramkrishna Girl's school in 16 Bosepara lane, few children were educated in the Kindergarten pattern. Here she emphasized on scientific education and crafts education. Her preference for the indigenous mode of education later has reflections on Tagore's establishment of the *Brahamacharya vidyalay*(school) in Santiniketan.

The second chapter-**A Discussion on the discourses of Indian aesthetics and crafts as a disavowal of the discourse on Occidental Orientalism** focuses on the

early 20th century India where the counter-colonial discourse of indigenous modernism as a disavowal of the occidental Orientalism and its claim for modernity had already gained a momentum. Modernity and progress aligned to the growth of industrial development , it also led to the destruction of handicrafts. The other project which developed with this idea of progress and industrial venture was that of establishing colonies and capitalistic exploitation of the colonies an extension of which was the cultural hegemony. But the colonized started the process of decolonization and in due course the reclaiming of their consciousness. Crafts and design became an important aspect in this discussion. Development of crafts was also viewed as a means to strengthen the indigenous economy. The understanding of beauty was being framed as against the belief of Indian art being grotesque .The rationale of the western perception of Indian art was being questioned and debated. Calcutta and Santiniketan became the epicentre of this discourse. During this phase of nationalism or early phase of indigenous modernism one sees the reformulation of the question of aesthetics in the Indian terms, the revival of Handicrafts and the concept of design. This chapter becomes important as it focuses on the art writings which became a pedagogic framework for the 'Swadeshi art movement' . The women artists whom I have discussed in the further chapters had been influenced by these discourses which became almost normative. There is an effort to accumulate the cultural capital or to be more articulate the embodied cultural capital .The traces of this ideological framing can be seen in the writings of the pedagogues like E.B.Havell

,Abanindranath ,Sister Nivedita, Rabindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose. The focus on crafts and the decorative also shows the appropriation of the feminine, creating a rupture in the continuous narrative of othering of the feminine thus giving indigenous modernism a gendered edge. The decorative was incorporated in the act of painting, ornamentation was retrieved as an important aspect of art practices and formulate the counter colonial discourse of Indian art. Moreover Abanindranath perceived art as *shaukh* which refers to hobby or leisure as the defining element of art. While Nandalal tried to view art practice as having a professional edge by thinking about crafts as the means to make the artists economically independent and secured. The readings of the texts by pedagogues like Abanindranath, Nandalal, Sister Nivedita, Coomaraswamy and Havell point out to the concerns of framing an aesthetics which includes the metaphysical aspect of Indian philosophy; the wider narrative of Pan Asia, the visibility of peripheral narratives of the folk and femininity .

The third chapter is **Women visible and women invisible**, this chapter does not focus on any standard formalist reading of art historical objects or the concept of an artist as a singular independent entity. But it tries to assess the paintings as cultural products. It attempts to understand the conditions which nurtured women's art and those which delimited it. The discussion in this chapter focuses on this absence and presence of the women in the visual culture. The first half of the chapter attempts to discuss women as objects of desire and ridicule. The idea is to open up the idea of *scopophilia* (taking other people as objects, subjecting

them to controlling and curious gaze) of colonial India in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The *scopophilia* which construed the colonial gaze and its project of othering, the popular culture of the colonized which conflictual in nature: at times gave in to the titillatory aesthetics and at times became satirical of the discourse of modernity and its relation to the construction of femininity. The discussion on femininity also includes the discourse of colonial masculinity and the concept of effeminate *babus* and the debased prostitutes. There are also critiques of the new women. These discussions are being contextualized in the visual culture of the *Kalighat patas*, *Battala prints* and caricatures by Gaganendranath. The concept of colonial masculinity engages with the power/knowledge nexus in the colonial discourse. Hence there is a re-articulation of the word 'home' the inner domain. *Andarmahal* becomes the *antarmahal*. The ideas of nationalism subsumes the spaces of femininity, constructs a cult of motherhood, imagines the nation as mother and refers to mythologies to construe the ideas of womanhood which also serve the ideals of nationhood. These images of the ideal womanhood is seen in the paintings of Ravi Varma, Abanindranath and Nandalal.

The informal education by the Vaishnavis and the European teachers in the *andarmahal* or *antahpur* got a new dimension. The glimpses of which can be seen again in the *Jorashanko Thakurbari* with the founding of Vichitra sabha/club/Kalabhavana. It is in this context one sees the creation of 'Vichitra sabha' which Rabindranath conceived as a *grihavidyalay*. The beginning of this

informal educational space was with the shifting of his son Rathindranath and his daughter-in-law Pratima Devi. Other artists like Sunayani Devi, Indira devi Chowdhurani, Sukhalata Rao and Hashirashi Devi practices in such informal spaces within the family. Thus the second half focuses on the *Vichitra sabha* and women artists who practiced in the informal spaces.

The fourth chapter is **The presence of women in the institutionalized space and their interventions: Kala bhavana (1920-1930)**. The concept of '*Kala bhavana*' came from the informal art space of *Vichitra* which was established in Jorasanko. This word was used profusely by Balendranath Tagore & may have influenced Rabindranath who would follow his writings quite regularly. Santiniketan art education thus focused on the experiential, a part of the everyday life, constructed and catered to the new taste and made art affordable to the middle class. This experiment experienced modernism in its own indigenous tradition which transcended polarization of colonial & anti-colonial & enriched itself from the transcultural intersections. Nandalal shouldered the responsibility of fulfilling the Santiniketan project of Rabindranth Tagore. From its inception Santiniketan enrolled female students which was a rare phenomenon in art institutions of that time. This endeavor to open an institutional space for the art education and also empowering the women with crafts education so that they can also choose a professional life is a pioneering attempt.

The fifth chapter-**Journals, memoirs and the articulation of the self in early 20th century Bengal: the writings on women and their art practice** develops from the very first step of documenting the women artists which was through the fragments in the memoirs, letters, reviews (written by them or the male writers), the references of their own art practices lay dismembered, dis-remembered and disintegrated. The fragments about their experiences in art practice become documents filling the lacuna of written materials on them. Their paintings would be rarely found in museums or important collections and were usually found in private collections of their descendants or the journals. The journals become an important source where both their paintings as well as writings by them and on them could be found. The other important sources are the memoirs. The journals, the manuals and the memoirs highlighted the conditions in which the women engaged with art practice, their spaces of visibility and brought out the inherent pedagogies which influenced their imagination.

Embroidery, weaving and quilting was practiced by the women since centuries. Modernism in the west had tried to glorify the act of painting as Fine arts, which was considered to be on the top of the hierarchical order in art and marginalized the crafts essentialising it to the idea of the feminine, a lower form of art excluded from the discussions of Fine arts .The act of painting and the medium; colour and canvas or the act of sculpting and its medium; stone or bronze received a more coveted position than the art forms the medium of which were the thread and textile or other ephemeral mediums like rice flour (alpona).This

order of things is also seen in the analogy of the building by Abanindranath in his comparison of art and its hierarchy. This categorical hierarchies of intellectual labour and manual art forms (crafts): the supposedly creative (painting) and the decorative, further becomes complex in the context of indigenous modernism. 'In the texts like *Aitereya Brahmana* , *shilpa* is referred to as an intellectual endeavor. The scope of inclusion of decorative tradition within this category seems to be debatable .Further women's art is considered feminine in a derogatory sense having no intellectual aura and is often categorized as decorative. *Visnudharmottara* refers to the term *bhushana* which has stronger association with the word decorative. There, it is described as among the four essential elements of painting. In this text itself, there is the reference of ornamentation and its association with women. According to this, 'the aesthete or *sahridaya* looks for skilled craftsmanship, while women have a taste for ornament and ordinary folks prefer vivid colour.'⁷This reminds again of the metaphor of ornaments in relation to female students by Abanindranth. He said—'I will build a temple in which the men will be the bricks. Art will be the idol and women will be the flowers with which I will make the garland.'⁸

The interpretations of *Bhushana*, according to Priyabala Shah, are

⁷ This discussion is referred from Rohini Iyengar's unpublished thesis on 'Figuring regional aesthetics: Women artists via Regional Histories and modernisms.p129

⁸Shilpiguru Abanindranath by Rani ChandaViswabharati publication,p-30

1)decoration,2)contextually the method and act of painting itself as decoration and 3)ornamentation to include ornaments for figures or in the areas of the painting⁹

This last discussion on ornament and ornamentation as being part of the art practice becomes important in the discourse of formulating the indigenous modernism. The discourse of the decorative and crafts which was identified with the domestic/feminine by the patriarchal discourse of art was subverted, in reclaiming the consciousness from the colonial discourse of the oriental it formulated the nationalist aesthetics by incorporating these ideas of othering and derogation as concepts empowering them. There is an attempt to resolve the difference between fine arts traditionally aligned with painting and sculpture and the decorative and ornamental.

The idea of the feminine is problematized in the discourse of nationalism as already discussed earlier, the tropes of mother becomes resources for co-opting the women's question in a regressive nature of the creation of a patriarchal narrative of mythification of the women's body as seen in the representations of Ravi Varma , Abanindranath and Nandalal .Their representations of female body uses the tropes of the unspoilt , nurturer and sacrificing women who differ from the debased prostitutes represented in the Kalighat patas, the Company and Battala paintings . The reformation movement had been problematized as a

⁹ Priyabala Shah,ed,Vishnudharmottara-Purana vol.1Oriental institute ,Baroda,1958

domain being regulated to reformulate the domain of patriarchy rather than allowance of occasional agencies to the women, sometimes tending towards the satirical images in the cartoons by Gaganendranath Tagore and Benoy Sarkar and Jatin Sen. The other area which became important for the reformulation of Indian art and in articulating its position as 'Fine arts' was the revival of the discourse of Aesthetics. The discussions on Indian aesthetics also sees the appropriation of the feminine by using female metaphors: Abanindranath's writings are replete with the feminine imagery. But there is also a denial of agency to the women as art practitioners. But within these narrations of appropriation of the feminine there is a rupture in the idea of the feminine as the category which becomes the parameter of difference that defines the normative status of other forms of art practice by men. These moments of appropriation also open up professional spaces for women in educational institutions, public spaces of exhibitions and journals.

The extension of this discussion of the feminine and gender is read through a brief discussion of Nilima Sheikh's work in the contemporary context where there is a critical re-appropriation of the indigenous modern which took its cues from the emphasis on history and historical processes which brings about a specific set of meanings for feminism and also speaks of the imagination of the woman which is being made and remade in different contexts and different times.

The discussions in this thesis attempts to bring in the discourse of gender through documentation of women artists of early 20th century Bengal, the aim being not writing them back to the canons of art history but to bring in the understanding of the construal of *women* in the art practices ,it is not to essentialize and neither to erase the existence of women in art practices but to understand the spaces in between and re-interpret the art historiography of the 'Swadeshi Art movement' with the aspiration to contribute to the feminist art historical interventions in Indian art.