



‘Bagaincha’: In Search of Our Nepali Mother’s Gardens

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Abstract: This paper discusses how Nepali women, manifest their creativity through their art and songs. As Alice Walker in her essay writes about the community of Black women finding their freedom of expression and foregrounding their identity through various forms of creativity, here, the essay takes up the case of women in a different geographical location, but in different ways subject to patriarchal oppression. The paper writes about the ‘maithil art’ by Nepali women within and across Indian borders, which is feminist. It has the power to go beyond aesthetics of expression and can lead to “artivism” and “activism”.

Keywords: *creativity, feminism, expression, artivism*

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise



I rise
I rise.

When Maya Angelou was writing “Still I Rise”¹, not only was she talking about the indomitable spirit of the black woman but she was also talking about the creative power. We human beings are all born with a certain degree of creativity within us. It is a force that comes from deep within the recesses of our soul and it is one to be reckoned with. No form of suppression can destroy the creative spirit. It is indivisible, indestructible, and eternal. The more it is nurtured, the better it manifests itself. The more it is suppressed, the more ways and means it finds to surface. Patriarchy is a system of repression which seeks to curb not just the body of the woman but everything within her and what she stands for. One of the ways in which it operates is through the mode of discourse. Patriarchy, recognized the creative force within womanhood long before women even had a chance to make it blossom and seeing its potency to completely upturn the status quo, it sought ways and means to nullify it. Time and again patriarchy renews and rejuvenates itself and finds new strategies to subdue women and their creativity.

In *The History of Sexuality I*, Michel Foucault talks of the ‘repressive hypothesis’ while addressing the issue of repression in society, especially that of sex. Foucault observes that, more of a taboo it becomes, the more ways in which it emerges in discourse. He says, “...around and apropos of sex, one sees a veritable discursive explosion.” (Foucault,17) He does add that such ‘explosions’ were ‘allowed’ to be part of the discourse in spite of the censorship to control it. Yet, the fact that it was done so meant, more and more people talked about it at the platforms provided to them such as the confessional box at churches. This theory may, in a way be applied to the censorship of the creative spirit. It has been found that it manifests itself most beautifully when under duress. Going back to patriarchy, man has never had to suffer the subjugation that women have had to face as far

¹ <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/still-i-rise>



as their creative powers are concerned. Men, generally, except for a few exceptions, had access to the means to express themselves and were readily lauded for their art. The more agony they articulated, the more attention they received, within certain limits of acceptance. Sadly, for the woman, she was not given any such space for self-expression. Around the Victorian era, a woman trifling with such affairs, was labelled as ‘transgressive’ by the society, was branded as a witch, a lunatic or even a negligent mother. She was stamped down as one who had abandoned her role as nurturer to engage in the ‘sinister’ arts and such notions carry sway even to this present day. On the creative spirit, Osho says, that men and women are one in such matters but he feels that since men do not possess the divine power to procreate, they resort to painting, sculpting and poetry to make up for it. He says that women express their creative soul best when they love. However, as ‘superior’ beings capable of giving life, women who engage in the modes of expression created by the ‘inferior’ men are simply depriving themselves of love and bringing themselves down to the same level as men who actually yearn to feel like them. Be that as it may, the soul of a woman is complex and apart from juggling the multifarious roles assigned to her, she yearns for an expression of the ocean of emotions within her through art.

In the introduction to *In Search of our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*, Alice Walker reflects on the creative spirit of the black woman. She ponders over the experience of the poet Jean Toomer who met a black prostitute whose spirit was so intense and yet she was simply living a dead existence with no outlet for her wonderful abilities. She says, they were “exquisite butterflies trapped in an evil honey, toiling away their lives in an era, a century, that did not acknowledge them, except as “the *mule* of the world.” ” (Walker, 401-402) Walker comments that among these women were her mothers and grandmothers who were fountains of immense spirituality and yet while they hoped for a day of redemption, that day never really did come. They were either too busy serving their master’s will at the plantations or they had to take care of ten hungry mouths at home while tending to their broken bodies as well. It would seem that all their hardships and agony would not let them express their art but the amazing thing is, they did find a way to do so. Walker



believes that their spirit manifested through their songs and the stories that they passed down from generation to generation. The domestic sphere that they were confined to was transformed into a site of manifestation for their art; the weaving of patchwork quilts, the baking of pies, braiding of hair all became expressions of their inner spirit. If the soul of the black woman may be located in these places then women all over the world too, confined by the norms of society and patriarchy have been developing different sites for the manifestation of their art. A group that is still spoken so little for is that of the Nepali women. One of the primary issues that arise in speaking for Nepali women is that there are no clear markers to distinguish the Nepali women in Nepal and in her neighbours like India which contain a sizeable portion of people of Nepali-origin. Being politically correct is an issue that needs to be addressed but the traditions are more or less the same as are the sufferings of the women folk. Thus, for the sake of this paper, the term ‘Nepali’ has been used to indicate women of Nepal as well as the women of Nepali-origin specifically spread over Sikkim and Darjeeling. Just as Alice Walker found the ways in which her ancestors manifested their creative spirit, this paper is an attempt to locate the site of manifestations of the creative soul of the Nepali women in the spaces they occupy.

A social evil that every society has to live with is patriarchy. Not only does it seek to suppress but it breaks the spirit of anyone going against it. It breaks, it plunders and it silences the soul of anyone it controls. It creates binaries and calls them fixities but the worst part is that it leads to the internalization of its ideals which is why Ashis Nandy rightfully points out, that women themselves are led to discriminate against women. However, no matter the hardships, the suppressed women have found a way to create a space of their own within the threshold of domesticity. As in the case of women of colour, Nepali women too cannot be placed in a separate sphere from their husbands, children and homes because they are much too rooted in society and tradition and to expect a complete split would take far too long and such a deracination could possibly mean losing what little semblance of an identity they have formed over time. They are still not ready to step out of their comfort zones but gradually, there has been a shift towards demanding for some form of



recognition, at least politically. If one is to understand the dynamics of Nepali women then, just as Alice Walker examined the art forms of her grandmothers, it becomes essential to observe the creative manifestations of the Nepali women too. That would perhaps be the first step towards realizing the shape that the Nepali ‘feminist’ or ‘womanist’ movement would eventually take. Looking at three instances covering art and song, namely Maithili art, the paintings of Ashmina Ranjit and the *bhailo* tradition during the festival of Diwali, this paper is an attempt to observe and locate the manifestations of the creative spirit of Nepali women in the urban and the rural spaces across borders.

Linda Nochlin, in her essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” questions the very institutions and education systems which seek to suppress the creative spirit of women saying,

“The fault lies not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles, or our empty internal spaces, but in our institutions and our education understood to include everything that happens to us from the moment we enter this world of meaningful symbols, signs, and signals.” (Nochlin, 2)

Throughout history, there may have been a female artist as great as or even greater than the likes of Leonardo da Vinci and Michaelangelo but they were never given credit nor were they given the license to express their creativity which is why terms like ‘maestro’ and ‘genius’ were solely confined to the domain of men. A fine example, is the case of Camille Claudel, the French sculptor and graphic artist, who was an inspiration for Rodin’s art and his student and mistress, and who had to lead a life in obscurity and die prematurely. If women in the West were meted out such iniquitous treatment, women of colour, women of Nepal and those of Nepali-origin suffered from double marginalization. The fact that they had to suffer at the hands of the society and their families tending to the roles assigned to them as daughter, wife and mother actually led them to seek release through various ways and means. With the little they had, they realized their art by creating a space for themselves within the socially sanctioned spaces. This may be observed in the paintings of the



women of the Mithila region spread over Nepal and India. Finding no other means to express their creativity, the Maithili women took to painting within the domestic space. The walls of their homes became their canvas and the natural vegetable dyes, their paint. Had it not been for an earthquake in Bihar in 1934, this art form would perhaps have taken even longer to be ‘discovered’. The quake exposed the interior walls of the Mithila houses on which scenes from everyday life, deities and functions such as weddings had been exquisitely painted in a variety of colours. It may be noted that while in India this art form is known as Mithila art or Madhubani art, in Nepal, in places where it is practised such as Janakpur, this art form is known as Maithil art. Talking about her experience while working with Maithil women in Janakpur, Coralynn V. Davis mentions the recurring image of the pond in their paintings and stories. She observes that,

...ponds are frequently sites for the articulation of women’s folktales and agency in plots featuring male protagonists. That is, the trope of the ponds shifts the imaginative register toward women’s perspectives and the importance of women’s knowledge and influence in shaping Maithil society. (Daryl, 290)

Within the Maithil community, perhaps the pond served as a site upon which they could not only depend on for water but was also a place where the women could meet and engage in discourse about their lives, their dreams and their aspirations. In a way, art became a means whereby the women could not only find release but could also have their say on social issues and the life they knew. Using images such as those of the ponds, Maithil women were able to highlight their presence and importance in Maithil society even though they had to live under the social gaze. While many of them still find it difficult to talk to people other than their families, their art speaks volumes for them. In allowing their words to flow through their brush into their paintings, the Maithil women have somehow managed to create a liminal space to call their own; a creative space that expresses their individuality. The pictures given below demonstrate Maithil art.



If in the rural spaces, the Maithil women used their paintings to speak for their inner creative spirits, then in the urban spaces of Kathmandu, artists like Ashmina Ranjit use their paintings not only as a medium of expression but also as weapons against the social restraints and atrocities against women. Dina Bangdel observes that “her in-your-face installation and performances constantly interrogates, challenge, and confront cultural stereotypes.”² The thing with Ashmina is that she is an occupant of the urban space so naturally she has had more exposure than the Maithil women but when it comes to struggling against the gender divide their issues are more or less the same. In calling herself an ‘artist’, Ashmina utilises her creative space as a voice against the social evils against Nepali women. In a way, like many contemporary female painters living in the urban spaces, Ashmina, in search of her ‘mother’s garden’ seems to have found her own and is taking it a step further to voice her concern over the innumerable issues faced by Nepali women. Perhaps one of the most dogmatic practices that are still followed in some of the rural areas of Nepal is the system of *Chhaupadi*. It involves a form of isolation or banishment of a woman to a cowshed or a separate makeshift hut during her menstrual cycle. The general concept is that a

²<https://ashmina.wordpress.com/>



woman is rendered unclean when she is menstruating which is why she must be kept separate from the household. For a while, the woman is transformed into an ‘untouchable’ and she must not partake of any of the household chores, engage in activities outside the home or interact with people from outside. One might see this as a time of recuperation for the female body but the pitiful conditions in which she must live are traumatizing. This practice is all the more traumatic for girls having their first menstruation signalling the onset of puberty and eventually womanhood. This phase is meant to serve as a reminder to her that she is no longer a child now and has to abide by the rules of society which keeps a constant check on her. In other words, it is a system which seeks to keep women from exploring themselves; a system to control their freedom and individual expression. In the urban areas, such a practice has been discontinued to a great extent but the taboo of menstruation persists in rural areas. Through a series of paintings titled “Women and Sensuality”, Ashmita Ranjit seeks to raise awareness and challenge this issue. The paintings below demonstrate this.



Fig.3



Fig.4

Both the figures speak of the unspoken. As in other societies, within the corpus of Nepali society too, one will find that women only possess a body. This body is of course, ‘bestowed’ on them. Society decides what parts are sacred and what parts are profane. If the same part of her body is capable of bringing forth life then the very part is also capable of generating disgust. Through the



use of the colour red in her paintings, Ashmina seeks to profane the sacredness of the colour red; an auspicious symbol so frequently used as a marker of wedded bliss. Ashmina writes that,

Life is driven by cultural and religious values where one is identified as a cultural being. This is specially so for a woman whose identity is circumscribed within social values. Society sees her active role as someone's daughter or wife, or mother and her 'self' (passive) becomes invisible among all those delicate socio/cultural aspects and vanishes into the beautiful, prestigious, inanimate objects.(Ranjit,28)

The objectification of women has led to a representation of them which they themselves have internalized. When this happens, not only do they risk losing their creative spirits but they also speak in the voices of men. If men speak in hard, concrete, words then women speak the metaphorical language. Ashmina Ranjit's works may be seen as a means to reclaim this metaphorical space which will eventually serve as a path towards freedom and the true expression of the self.

Apart from art, song and music have always formed a crucial part of the Nepali society. Traditionally, in the course of the entire year, it is only one particular night that Nepali women claim their own without any judgement from society and that is, on a new moon night during the third day of the festival of Tihar (Diwali). Had it not been for the social sanction, perhaps they would not have been able to follow their practice, but because they have it, they have found ways and means to make the most of it and create their own small liminal space. Travelling in groups in and around the village, young girls and women go from door to door singing the *bhailo*. Speaking as 'messengers' of the generous king Bali, these singers bear good tidings and bless the household with good fortune and health for the coming year. What is interesting about this occasion is that a new moon night is generally associated with witches and other such superstitions. It was held that any girl going out on a full moon night was bound to be a witch but no such claims are made on the night of *bhailo*. This tradition may be seen as a fissure in the social system because while it



seeks to control and gives limited freedom to women even on such a night, it is also an indication that society can be reformed from within and this particular night may serve as a means to challenge it. In a way, *bhailo* may be seen as an anthem of all the free creative souls of Nepali women the world over because it presents women not only as keepers of tradition but also as beings of immense strength and will.

Nepali women the world over still have a long way to go if they are to redefine themselves. The first task would be to understand the system that seeks to suppress them. It would involve looking at the practices and traditions of our Nepali mothers who had the creative spirit within them. But they were too caught up juggling multiple roles as caregivers of their homes. Thus, they either suppressed their artistic desires or expressed them in the small domestic space they occupied. The likes of Ashmina Ranjit have discovered the secret fountain of creativity which kept the Nepali mothers alive. And this urge for self-expression and self-assertion, has the power to lead women beyond the realm of aesthetics into the realm of activism and identity formation.

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