PORTRAITURE OF INDIAN WOMEN IN THE PAINTINGS OF ARPANA CAUR

ABSTRACT

SUBMITTED FOR THE AWARD OF THE DEGREE OF

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By

SHAGUFTA KHANAM

Under the supervision of

PROF. SEEMA JAVED

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ABSTRACT

Indian women have often played an important role in society. Bowing to the dictates of a predominantly patriarchal society, the woman was assigned the role of a homemaker, nurturer, a wife, a mother and at times a lover. Indian art and artists has mirrored the social status of women, which is why though most of Indian art does have women as the central theme, their portrayal is often one-dimensional. Today’s contemporary artists also choose to highlight women’s issues through their art. A study of Indian art is in fact a study of the changing image of Indian femininity.

In this context, Arpana Caur is one of the finest artists among the new generation of artists in India. Although she has taken up paintings pastel on paper, gouache, collaborative and mostly oil on canvas. She chose to work on the critical problems of Indian women and gave an artistic touch to it.

Arpana’s introduction to painting came via sculpture after her tutelage under B.K. Guru. In the main, however, she is a self-taught artist. She had a scholarship for advanced course in painting in St. Martins College of Art London 1979 but chose to return after a month as she missed her home & India. Her earliest exhibited paintings of 1974, of heavy muscular androgynous women, are in a somber palette. From the outset, she located her figures in the Punjabi milieu adopted by Amrita Sher Gil of women with their
veils and thick khadi salwar-kameez texture on which the “Phulkaries” of Punjab could be embroidered. However Sher Gil’s havelis and open spaces become congestive city pavements darkened corners, and Sher-Girl’s melancholic figures of the “other” Indian appropriated by Arpana Caur as the tragic self. The relative isolation of the small urban family and the complexity of Arpana’s own situation, of a fraught childhood with separated parents are seen in early paintings of her mother, her grandfather, and she herself of the family selectively severed and then rejoined. This biographical, even cathartic, strain proffered with little self-consciousness was to recur with engaging direction during the first decade. “Women in Interiors” of the mid 1970’s was an early series of paintings. These paintings also plotted a personal graph.

As a child, there were many things that the silent, sensitive Arpana Caur had felt passionately about. And prominent among them was the atomic bomb-blast that destroyed two cities and brought Japan to its knees in World War II.

Even today, the nuclear destruction that the atom bomb wrought evokes the same fear, the same anguish, and the same compassion in the artist. So when the Hiroshima Museum wrote to her, asking if she would do a painting on the theme ‘Hiroshima’ to mark the 50th year of the tragic event, Caur went to work a vengeance in 1994 for the Rs. 7 lakh.
Hiroshima Museum of Modern Art commissioned 10 artists from world over. She was also invited and the amount of seven lakhs was decided for her painting which created a lot of sensation in the art field. That painting is still from a part of the collection of that museum. Initially people used to think her to be Mr. Arpana Caur (including Hiroshima Museum) were surprised to learn that she is Ms. Arpana Caur.

Now back from Japan, where her work triptych titled "Where are all the Flowers Gone" (fig. 1.7) formally installed at the sprawling Hiroshima Museum-along with the works of four other Asian artists, who had also been commissioned to work on the theme, Arpana Caur is both modest and full of child-like enthusiasm about her achievement. The three frames of the 12 x 6 feet triptych displayed at Hiroshima depict lotuses (symbolizing life) blossoming under the blue sky and on deep blue water, guns and soldiers (signifying death) and a forlorn woman (the ultimate victim of all violence) draped in a black veil sitting dejectedly in the rain under black clouds of destruction. The images are a subtle evocative depiction of the twin themes of violence and peace.

Arpana is basically a featuring artist; her work mostly depicts women lost in thoughts. She held the low grade women to be powerful. Her work always shows low working class women in their loose Kurta and Salwar, toiling day and night with a distant dream compared to the high class-working leading a fabulous and sexy life. Arpana in her paintings of
'Vrindavan' showed old women whose head and brows shaved off. The 1979 'Maya Tyagi Rape Case' was depicted in her canvas showing the partiality and careless of the police on the title 'Custodious of Law'. Caur has created stoic heroines like 'Sohni' who, despite being unable to swim, crossed the river several times to be with her lover using clay pots to float across. The metaphor can also be read as a will to stay buoyant despite adversity. Several of her female protagonists possess the will to triumph, even while faced with diversity. These are not deities, but everyday women who grapple with the pressures and violence of daily existence. Her art is remarkable in the simplicity, with which she presents a radical view of the realities of our lives, using images that we are used to in a new context. In Arpana’s painting the lovers’ worlds are separated by the fast-flowing blue and green waters of the ‘Chenab’ that divide it diagonally. Over recent years her works have become more symbolic and certain symbols keep appearing, colour still dominates her work, but she has started to use more black in her works, which beautifully offsets the blues, browns and gold she likes to use.

The activity of her great paintings of females is not limited to religious - philosophical significance but extends always into social and political significance. Her paintings reflect situation of Indian women. Arpana’s work on female-related themes has over the years been spoken about for placing women in an urban content, where the erotic is downplayed by a practical approach. She brings into focus issues around struggles and status of women
in India and their sexuality. The same theme and title in another work gets a reinterpretation when the body of her protagonist is turned upside down. Note worthy are the surrounding scissors and tape that not only cut to size the cloth that she wears to cover her body and protect her modesty but that can also be used to measure the depth of her pain and scars which restrict her freedom.

The isolation of the individual is a recurrent theme in her paintings. Isolation in grief, creativity, and even innocence, are seen in her series ‘Missing Audience’ in 1981. This alienation is more prominent in her later works. She continued to paint the common individual and the spirit and self even when abstraction dominated Indian art. Arpana’s paintings show her mystical temperament. Most of her paintings have a spiritual theme and draw inspiration from indigenous cult movements like the Bhakti cult. The songs of mystic poet, Kabir and the Baul minstrels of Bengal find echo in Arpana’s brilliantly coloured canvases. Her paintings indeed preach the foremost philosophy of the bhakti leaders – tolerance. Caur’s rich background and struggle informs her work and her position as a Sikh woman- artist who has survived both partition and the 1984 riots has empowered her work with a political subtext. She depicted the carnage of the anti-Sikh riots following the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1984 as a personal catharsis, a concern of the community, a question of race and humanity in her series ‘World Goes On’ winning the Triennale award in 1986. She refused to follow the mainstream and consciously took up the cause of the people.
Arpana’s paintings are inspired by the nineteenth-century miniature tradition of the Pahari styles of the Punjab Hills. They include the bold Basohli school, and the romantic Kangra and Guler schools that produced some of the most lyrical paintings in Indian art. Here the finger-like extensions of the rockymountains are seemingly joined in the pious namaste mudra (greeting gesture), that recall the highly stylized slopes and colorings found in early Pahari paintings. It is as if they have recognized the great spirit of Nanak and are imploring him for forgiveness. The small figure of a woman in the inset red-bordered painting holds her hands out towards Nanak, echoing the sentiments of the mountains.

Every series by Arpana Caur is self-created. She is also a poet of great sensitivity. She has painted on various themes, an important one of the earlier phase being gender inequality and the suppression of women, and later She has been fascinated by the religious sensibility of folk cults and the Bauls (itinerant singers of Bengal who sing devotional songs) have figured frequently in her work. Caur expands and personalises Sher-Gil’s reductive ‘otherness’ editing out any hint of romance or onlooker status in the process. In a number of Arpana Caur’s paintings it is the woman’s exaggeratedly extended hand, whether she is lifting, carrying or particularly embroidering that immediately strikes the onlooker. The compositional device of the hookah (clay pipe) and the Chhatri (umbrella) have been humanized and given life. The extended hand symbolises the strength and the power of the
women who appear in Arpana's paintings. Caur's women are in harmony with nature, they are drawn from the earth. They play with the tree sprites, and wade through water; they are one with clouds and the sky.

Deeply spiritual, Arpana Caur's finely executed work that is partly autobiographical seems to spring from her religious and spiritual leanings. Notions of time, life and death and a mystical search for harmony and peace underline most of her creations that have a depth and a mystical tone. Much of her figuration is self-portraiture and her creative oeuvre is a reflective of her experiences of growing up as the only living daughter of a single mother.

Arpana's identification of Basohli for its strong colours and spatial division was especially apt, for among all the miniature painting styles Basohli has a recognizably strong feminine type. Whether devi or nayika, the woman in this hill school is painted with a strength that belies the demure, delicate nayika more usually seen, and Caur adopts the passionate tone, if not the sensual evocativeness of figures in Basohli painting.

Basically a self taught artist, the young Caur was taken by surprise when three of her paintings were selected by M.F. Hussain in a group show of young artists in 1974 in Delhi. Her first successful' exhibition came in 1980 at the Jahangir Art Gallery Mumbai where all her works were sold out. Today, her works be they oil on canvas, small works on paper with pencil, gouache, pastel or prints form part of the collections of such museums as the National Gallery of Modern art, the Indian Council for cultural Relations, the

At present for instance, Arpana’s art is going through a period of transition. She has begun incorporating elements of Madhubani works in her paintings primarily because it helps create a witty juxtaposition of two worlds of women’s art from the village in the form of traditional patterns of trees and animals, set off against the off shoots of today’s worlds.

She started her career in 1975. At that time people were not so enthusiastic about art and it was quite difficult for an artist to make her mark. But she undertook this challenge and proved her worth. She showed that she is going to be one of the successful artists in future and results are for all to see.

Only few artists of the present India art scene have such an eminent influence and are present in all important art-centers of the world. Arpana Caur’s works are part of the collection of several important institutions including the Museums of Modern Art in New Delhi, Mumbai, Chandigarh, Düsseldorf, Singapore, Bradford, Stockholm, Hiroshima and Los Angles, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco and the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem. Her positive, always active and social oriented œuvre obtains energy from immense pleasure in
pictures and narrations bonded to time and space. Secular and spiritual aspects blend.

Aarpana Caur depicted Indian women figures in most of her paintings. She pained on many different issues like-

1. Spiritualism and mysticism
   - Nanak
   - Sufi
   - Budhha
   - Kabir
2. Love
3. Riots
4. Environment
5. Delhi history
6. Women’s condition
7. Day and night

Aarpana Caur derives a lot of her subject matter from ancient Indian miniature painting traditions; however, she completely divests these historical figures of their romanticism and reveals them in stark reality. Her work has a strong narrative force. The distorted figures have attained more and more dramatic inevitability with the passing years.
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THESIS

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that Mrs. Shagufta Khanam of research scholar in the Department of Fine Arts has completed her Ph.D. thesis entitled "Portraiture of Indian women in the paintings of Arpana Caur" undertaken under my supervision.

To the best of my knowledge and belief, this research work is based on the investigations, made data collected and analyzed by her and it has not been submitted in any other university or institution for the award of any degree. This is her original work.

Prof. Seema Javed
(Supervisor & Chairman)
Dedicated
to my
Husband
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Further I would like to pay my thanks to other members of the non-teaching staff of Department of Fine Arts and Maulana Azad Library, Aligarh Muslim University.

For any errors or inadequacies that may remain in this work, of course, the responsibility is entirely my own.

(Shagufta Khanam)
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Introduction
INTRODUCTION

India has a unique culture of paintings, ranging from primitive cave paintings and tribal art work to magnificent creations of master craftsman who enjoyed royal patronage to paintings contemporary artists that fetch millions at auction houses worldwide. Over the centuries the medium of paintings, the material, style and themes have modified. What has remained consistent, however, is the Indian artist’s fascination with female form. Perhaps that is why Indian art is sometimes called female art.

Probably the oldest depiction of woman is the bronze statue belonging to the Indus Valley Civilization. These figures are not the first art objects to represent the feminine. Leaving aside the figures of the Harappan civilization which appear to be stylistically and culturally unconnected with anything in the historic period, there are terracotta images, believed to represent fertility or mother goddess figures. These are not images, they are symbols. They do not pretend to represent the physical impression of the female form. The Mauryan figures are directly linked to these early fertility figures. The idea of producing an image of women in plastic arts clearly arose during the fourth and third centuries. Our only evidence for it comes from the region of Patna at the heart of the Mauryan Empire so it is assumed that the impetus probably came from the court artists of that period and locality, but we lack evidence
to say for certain. The artists had several options in these early figures (fateful choices, as they would set the pattern for Indian female images for millennia); they could copy the image of some other society, such as China, Greece or Iran; they could produce a naturalistic image from life; they could modify a local tradition. They choose the third. The Mauryan terracotta girls are the ancient fertility figures transformed from symbol to image. Large breasts, wide hips, tapering legs, are all retained but now the artists no longer symbolize the feminine, they now attempt to represent it. Three important sites help to show the development of female images between the Sunga and Kushan period; Bharhut, Sanchi, and Ajanta. Each of these sites lies outside the borders of the Kushan Empire but they form a part of the same artistic tradition as Mathura.

Bharhut provides a base point from which to characterize female images in the Sunga period. The women are posed frontally facing the viewer; in a fairly 'stiff' manner (this is true for both male and female figures). Their jewelry includes ankle rings, bracelets, necklaces, and large hanging earings. The hair is elaborately platted, and a drape of material is hung over the girdle and between the legs. The women wear nothing but jewelry above the waist and their physical form, large round breasts, thin waist, wide hips has not changed much from the Mauryan period. There is no attempt to differentiate individual women on the basis of their physical appearance (for example,
Queen Maya is recognizable only in scenes of the conception of the Buddha by the presence of a white elephant).

The images at Sanchi are repeated in ivory images found at both Begram and Pompey. With the addition of just one more element from the South the Kushan Empire is about to receive the fully fledged female form that will endure throughout the period. Two things change with the Sanchi figures. First the contortion of the body into an 'S' shaped curve, sometimes referred to as the tribangha or 'pose of the three bends' (by art historians, there is no evidence what, or even if, it was called by contemporary artists). Secondly the drape of material intended to preserve modesty in the Sunga period is now parted so that it hands down the outside of the legs and gives an image of full frontal nudity. The images now need only a simplicity in the couture to develop into the Kushan form, the impetus for which comes from somewhere else entirely.¹

But the best presentation and attribute to woman is by Ajanta artists in the caves of Ajanta. The paintings capture the attention of every art lover. According to art scholars the Ajanta woman is not just such a perfect understanding and homage. The mystical, symbolic, sensual and idealistic are all aspects of the Ajanta woman. Even in other Buddhist centre of art like Mathura, Sanchi and Bharhut women are portrayed elegantly draped in sheer fabrics. Artists felt no inhibitions in their portrayal. Women of Ajanta are the
art connoisseur's delight. The Ajanta artist has painted the whole range of women characters such as ladies of court and their maids, dancers, common women in their house-hold chores. The woman was the theme that gave full scope for expression of creative genius for the Ajanta artist. The artist had succeeded in reproducing the soft roundness of her breasts, the curves of her hips, the turn of her head, the gestures of her hands and the slanting glance of her eyes. It is intriguing that most of Ajanta heroines are depicted naked, or in near nudity, while all the others in the same scene are fully clothed. The sculptures of the women in Khajuraho frescos are assured and supremely confident in their sexuality. Yet, even in these depictions, we can glimpse the importance of women in Indian history and mythology. Essentially Indian Gods were nothing without their consorts who were considered the goddesses of wisdom, learning and wealth.

Women in Mughal, Rajasthani and Pahari miniature paintings are more decorative. This image of women changed with the Mughal period in art where women were closeted behind walled gardens and heavily veiled. The woman was relegated to a decorative item, no thought, no emotion, just she and the birds and her hand maidsens in blossoming alcoves, in pretty Mughal miniatures - Typical of the times and the thoughts of the rulers! History has no record of any Mughal queen who dominated Indian politics or society. The legendary Mumtaz Mahal is only immortalised as the favourite queen of
Shah Jehan in the Taj Mahal. The medieval period was the court era. Art was under the patronage of rulers. The *Bharat Natyam* Shastra classified women in 3 categories: goddess, heroin and courtesan (devi, nayika, ganika). The nayak-nayika theme was popular with artists of the 16th – 17th century. Heroes and heroines were usually taken from popular Sanskrit poems mainly of Krishna and Radha. These paintings depict the woman waiting for her lover or going to meet him. The whole scene, her eyes, attention – everything – is focused on her lover.5

In Mughal art women were presented simply as beauties - bathing women with their attendants were repeatedly painted by this era of artists. In these paintings the status of women is shown in different ways like the royal ladies were normally shown hidden behind a veil (parda) or within four walls surrounded by attendants. On the whole Mughal paintings portrayed women trying to please the lover and ignored the true sentiments of women which are an integral part of Hindu philosophy.6

With changing times presentation of ideas changed and is reflected in the portrayal of women. In modern times the new, realistic and individualistic woman knows her mind, her actual place in society. A woman was a true ‘ardhangini’ or ‘better half’. Raja Ravi Varma, one of the well known artists of Indian art, portrayed the divine aspect of women, their joy of being alive, as well as the home maker aspect. For him the perfect Indian woman was the
dutiful daughter, the loving mother, the ideal homemaker. He portrayed gorgeous sari clad women in a svelte manner. Raja Ravi Varma is most remembered for his paintings of gorgeous sari clad women, who were portrayed as very shapely and graceful. He is considered as modern among traditionalists and a rationalist among moderns. He traveled throughout India in search of subjects. He stayed in Bombay for some years and many works depicting a beautiful Maharashtrian woman came into existence. The British ‘Raj’ in India brought with it a heightened sense of morality; scantily dressed women were now out. A baroque and posed, almost stiff portrayal of figures and women in art was ushered in. But this was also the time when women began to be exposed to an education. Amrita Shergil in her realistic portrayal of women became an inspiration for young future artists. She may have been inspired by the Ajanta paintings but she knew the plight of Indian women so she applied her own interpretations. Her “A Group of Three Girls” with their deeply thoughtful sad faces seem to carry fear of the unknown future. In another painting “Women on Charpai” is the common woman, not the heroine of Mughal or Rajasthani miniatures. She is in rustic surroundings, not waiting for anybody, but deeply in her own thoughts. She acknowledged the influence of Mughal miniatures on this work.

In the present time, there are several Indian painters and artists who depict the beauty of Indian women in their paintings, and Arpana Caur is one
of them who paint Indian women in different style. The women in her paintings are sturdy and there is no hint of sexuality. Women and nature are both symbiotically tied in a circle. She believes that women represent the latent force, which has not been explored properly even today. They can counter the challenges of industrialization and extreme urbanization. Inherently, they have a power to renew and regenerate.

The aim of this thesis is to discuss and highlight the portraiture of Indian women in Arpana Caur's paintings. Here is the introduction of self-taught artist Arpana Caur, she was born on 4th September 1954 in Delhi. She grew up in an environment that was rich in art and music, with great love and affection. She attended Delhi University and graduated with a MA in Literature in 1961. Her maternal grandparents, mother and brother, eminent doctor Padma Shri. Vibhushan Dr. J. S. Bajaj came as refugees from Lahore to Delhi in 1947. Arpana Caur was attracted to the artistic world since her childhood. At the age of 3, she had started to paint pictures on wall. Her mother Ajeet Caur, author of the novel 'Khanabadosh' (homeless) realized her daughter's interest in art and encouraged her to go ahead in this field. She has been greatly influenced by her mother, who nurtured her talent. She brought her as a single parent, and she still shelters her, whenever she needs her.
Arpana Caur has been a woman of independent thought. As a child she wanted to fly under the open sky and wanted to know the secrets of nature, fathom the depth of water and height of the sky. She always used to be absorbed in contemplation. At age of 9 she made an oil painting titled *Mother and Daughter*, which was inspired by the creation of Amrita Shergil. Till the age of 15, she didn’t have any name, she was called by a pet name. Her mother didn’t give her a Sikh name because of her equal respect for all religions, she left the decision on her daughter to choose name for herself. When Caur went to boarding school, she had to give in a name and her first choice was Amrita (inspired by Amrita Shergill) but, she felt guilty and ashamed of equating herself with the great painter and so she changed it to Arpana. But Mulk Raj Anand, famous writer, found it very awkward. He told her that her name and surname don’t go together.⁹

Given her shy, sensitive persona, it is not difficult to look for the emotional props that are as crucial to the artist as her sensitivity; one is her husband Harinder, as a sitar player, designer and now a cartoonist, who prefers to keep a low profile. She got married in 1988; her father-in-law Jaswant Singh was a painter.

The other is her mother, who introduced her to various creative media, so, that she could decide what she wanted to take up, so dance, sitar and painting classes went on simultaneously for Young Arpana, whose father Dr. Rajendra
Singh died when she was barely a teenager. And of course, there were stocks and stocks of books from her mother’s collection which she read alongside. The only extraneous agent in all this was radio she got to listen whenever her grandfather turned it on. A television set came in much later.

**HER MOTHER: HER INSPIRATION**

Her mother Ajeet Caur is a person of unusual passion whether it is as a daughter, sister, wife, lover, mother, creative artist or a social activist. Primarily a fiction writer, she has nineteen collections of short stories and two novels to her credit. She was born in 1934 in Lahore and had her early education there. After the partition, she came to Delhi and completed her education with M.A. in Economics and B. Ed. She then took up journalism and edited two directories of trade.\(^\text{10}\)

For twenty-two years now she edited the Rupee Trade. But if she has been an economist or a journalist by profession, she seems to have been a writer both by choice and inclination. And she has made a mark as a short-storywriter. In fact, she is one of the very best in the language. Her well-known works in the genre are Gulbano, Malik di Maut, Butshikan, Faitu aurat, Saviyan, Chirian and Maut All Babe di. She received many honors and awards from the Government and literary institutions. The Punjab Government honored her for the collection of short stories, Gulbano
in 1962. The same year Punjabi Sahitya Samikhya Board chose her as the Shiromani Sahitkar of the year.

In 1979 she was honored by the Punjabi Arts Council and in 1983 by the Punjabi Academy, Delhi, as one of the nine distinguished writers living in Delhi and in 1984 she received both the international IAPX Award and the Baba Balwant Award. The Sahitya Akademi honored her by giving her its annual award of 1985 for her autobiography, Khanabadosh. She writes in a racy and fluent style and her insight into the human situation is penetrating. She has enriched the language with her valuable creative work. With the help and efforts of her mother, Arpana Caur developed a new form in her art. Her mother has been her inspiration and support throughout not only as a single parent but also in many other ways, trying to this date, to shelter her from the bruises of the world. That explains why even the humblest woman in Arpana’s figurative works manages to carry such authority and weight.

Arpana cannot discuss her art without mentioning and being grateful to her mother for what she is today “It is she who encouraged me to paint when I was young, who persuaded me to give up my teaching job (Deshbadhu college, New Delhi), to become a fulltime artist. In fact, so great is my emotional dependence on her that I do not like to go anywhere without her,” she says.
Being a writer herself, Ajeet Caur was able to make Arpana feel the angst an artist must feel before transmitting it into a work of art. Little wonder then that Ajeet Caur became the subject of number of her daughter’s paintings be it the series called *Mother* (Fig. 1.3) where she explores the maternal relationship or canvases depicting such mundane activities as her mother tweezing her eyebrows.

In fact, it is almost with child-like enthusiasm that Arpana takes you around the impressive newly build four storied *Academy of Fine Arts and Literature* that her mother has set up after decades of struggle and toil. The academy which started functioning in its new premises in the posh Siri Fort Institutional area has a huge art gallery and three museums (miniature paintings, folk art and Arpana’s work of different periods) and has a hall for literary gatherings, music concerts, symposiums, films, a vocational training centre for women and economically backward youngsters besides facilities for pottery, sculpture classes, an amphitheatre for staging plays and cafeteria.\textsuperscript{13}

Arpana comes across as a surprisingly simple, down to earth person delights in the joys she gets from doing such mundane chores as speaking track of the daily ration needs, buying vegetables and cooking simple meals for the family—her husband, mother and herself. She has a canvas to paint in her kitchen also.
Basically a morning artist who has put her palette by the forenoon, Arpana makes no bones about the fact that she is a reclusive person who hates having guests over, or going out for function and gatherings, even it is an exhibition where her own works are showing. “Even our relatives and friends seldom come over.” She says.

The only outing that the entire family enjoy is to their ‘Guru Sahibji’s Ashram’ in Ghaziabad, once a week. “It provides me with a very good escape” confesses Arpana. Besides meditation and recitation from the holy tracts, going to the ashram involves doing Sewa right from cooking meals for all, washing the utensils and sweeping the floors. “It is a place where everybody is nobody and the only purpose is to find spiritual peace,” she explains.14

Gurbani has always played an important part in Caur’s household recordings of Bani frequently plays as she paints and is an integral part of her life. She wakes up to the strains of Abida Parveen and the gurbani. Her family's upbringing was extremely secular in the true tradition of Sikhism with equal reverence for all religious faiths and reverence and respect for all places of worship; an old tradition of India. The sharing of one’s earnings (Vand ke shako) is another virtue imbibed on Arpana by her grandfather, mother and her faith. She together with her mother has been
running free School for 150 slum women for 35 years with 9 teachers. They also participate in several other projects related to widows and leprosy.

These projects are all sustained entirely from the earnings from her paintings without any grants from anywhere else. Part of her personal revenue also goes to two Saints in Sultanpur Lodhi and Khadoor Sahib who do immense amount of environmental work.\textsuperscript{15}

In her childhood, her home used to resonate with hymns and gurbaani of the Gurus and since that period she has carried very different images of Nanak in her mind. It was her grandmother who has initiated her into the teachings of Guru Nanak when she was still a child. She often used to recite ‘Guru Nanak Shah Fakir’, Hindu Ka Guru, ‘Musalman ka Pir’ she says “I was too young to understand the significance of these lines”. All these images started taking place in her canvas in the form of ‘Nanak’ series. “I have been painting Nanak since 1980 as he did not belong to a particular religion. Though a Hindu by birth, he never believed in the external manifestations of faith. He refused to wear Janeu. I have come across people in Ladakh who call him Lama Nanak while in Baghdad he’s called Peer Nanak”. The theme has been there at the back of her mind since the ’80s when she happened to visit Ladakh. In the Leh-Alchi Ladakh, area the Indian Army has built a Gurudwara (The Sikh shrine). Guru Nanak is called Lama Nanak there, and some monks even believe Lord Buddha was a reincarnation
of the former. This experience led her to propagate Nanak as a symbol of religious harmony, an anti-dote in today's strife-torn world, through her work. The genocide of Sikhs in Delhi in 1984 further reinforced her faith in Nanak and the urge to spread his thinking through her art. In 1986 she based a body of works on him. Her being Sikh is not the sole reason for the artist choosing Guru Nanak Sahib, the founder of Sikhism, for her series of work. A great social reformer he was, Nanak upheld the cause of women, and the poor. As an artist, Arpana Caur shares similar concerns. Elaborating on Nanak's philosophy, she said, "I consider him the first medieval thinker", in her triptych entitled, *Immersion*, Emergence, 2003 (fig.1.5), she describes Nanak's spiritual quest in a powerful set of paintings set against a dense black background. In this triptych the element of narration encourages the viewer to follow Nanak into the waters and sit with him in his submerged state as he fingers his rosary, before emerging at the top of the right painting. The darkness of the paintings casts a spell giving a timeless quality to the period of Nanak's immersion when the world itself seemed to die. Guru Nanak going under water for contemplation, when he emerged, he was seer. One of his teachings referred to the quality of all beings. The net symbolizes worldly desires, the fishes trapped in it-human beings. The two works are parts of a diptych. "Most of the earlier works on the subject that I had done in the last two decades had been sold off, but I wanted to do a series evoke his
secular spirit and his travels to as far as Baghdad. This is my humble homage to the free spirit that Nanak was, she adds”.

Arpana Caur was very much impressed by ‘Sufism’. She produced different paintings on that issue. In the same way, she used the image of water since 1984 to indicate death by violence (massacre of Sikhs). She also painted ‘Kabir’ series, in which Kabir is weaving water. She depicted ‘Buddha’ in her paintings for the past 15 years. In one of her paintings, ‘The Great Departure’ (2000) (fig.1.4) Buddha leaves his sleeping wife and child at night in search of truth. The abstract white sheets are a bold visual device against the black, their stark linearity creating surprising visual tension with rounded mountains and human forms. The use of white as a colour has been inspired from miniatures. ‘The Neon Deity’ appears both in the canvas and the collaborative works - there are notions of an indelible nature which range from the earthly to the ethereal - while we distance ourselves from it, we are forced to strike parallels with Buddhist ideologies and actually traverse that orbit.

What occurs is a quaint emotion of a tireless tenor, which celebrates the abstracting quality of form. The material quality of viscosity is worked in to give an emotive assimilation. The discerning eye notes that this artist works on the abacus of a legacy, one that pays tribute to traditional art forms, as well as folk idioms. Even if the female figure dominates and determines the
essence of her sensibility, this artist has rare understanding of early 16th –
18th century miniatures. The Pahari tradition specifically serves a comparison
in terms of construct. However, she subverts the spatial distribution so that
the resultant turmoil and strength both exude out naturally.  

Arpana Caur paints female figures in most of her works to express her
massage to the viewer.

**AMRITA SHERGIL – HER IDOL**

She has been always deeply influenced by the tragic life of Amrita –
Shergil. So, when she read her biography by Yashodhara Dalmia. She was
moved deeply by the story of the first woman artist who took the art of world
of her time by storm and died mysteriously at 29.

In the words of Arpana Caur, “Her story also touched me because I
somehow identified with Amrita since the age of nine, when I based my first
oil painting on her titled, Hill Women. When my mother wanted me to
choose my name before filling my school – leaving certificate at 15, my first
choice was Amrita. Then my head said to my heart “Don’t be silly, don’t
make a laughing stock of yourself, you are nowhere near her”, so I adopted
‘Arpana’. But I drank in her work, her letters to her mother (quoted by
Yashodhara), in which she talks of her self – exploration, her difficulties and
ecstatic moments, especially when she sees the Ajanta and Ellora caves, and
writes that a single line of Indian art is worth more than the whole European Renaissance”.

“Her life story reveals her extroverted and very glamorous persona (which is just the opposite of me) but through every word of Amrita’s, one can sense that she only lived for her art. This book drove me to make a pilgrimage to her birthplace by the Danube in Budapest two years ago. The placard bearing her name made me burst into tears for I had found the house without knowing any address, guided by a Hungarian women artist who said she was her ‘Soulmate’. I told her ‘So am I’. Strangely, the women running a tailoring shop in that house, who spoke no English, could not understand my sentimentally or my tears as I sat in that house. That is how far removed art or artist is from the man on the street which was, particularly, the subject of Amrita’s works”.

Arpana Caur, in her childhood days used to listen to the stories of the brave patriots. She was slowly advanced to her youth under the natural beauty of the capital Delhi; she was unknown when gradually an artist was born inside her. She also used to see her mother helping beggars, poor people and orphans. Being sensitive in nature, she used to get affected deeply by looking at their miserable life and depressed on interacting with them. Many children on the road side at various areas of Delhi picking up waste makes
her feel sad. Since her early years of life, these situations always affected her deeply and she effortlessly manifested them in her paintings.  

She kept on painting but lacked self confidence. Between, 1974-75, she began to participate in group shows. In early 70’s, only two private galleries were in Delhi. Dhoomimal and Kumar, and only three galleries were on hire, Shridharnis, AIFACS and Rabindra Bhawan. During that time art was not in range in Delhi and just two buyers were in the city, so most of the artists moved to Mumbai for selling, because Mumbai was the Mecca for the artists and there were great lovers and patrons of art like Parsi, Jahangir and Godrej. They were chiefly interested in art. In early 70’s, only two newspapers were in Delhi, in which no artistic news or articles were released. When one of these newspapers released two three lines about Arpana Caur’s art by rotary then other artists and critics were excited to know about this new emerging lady artist Arpana Caur. They thought that she is really a good artist. Although she has never trained as a painter, her works were chosen by M. F Hussain in 1974, for an exhibition at the capital’s premier launching pad, Triveni. J. Swaminathan, Paramjeet Singh and many other well known artists participated in that exhibition. Her paintings were written about and appreciated in that exhibition and which gave her self confidence. Following this success, in 1975, her family friend Bhavesh Sanyal came to her place and
encouraged her to do a solo show of her paintings and since then she kept on moving.22

She held her first solo exhibition in 1975 at Shridharani Gallery, Triveni Kala Sangam, New Delhi. A London Art Gallery owner Maria Souza (also Newton Souza's first wife) saw her work there and invited her for a show in London, which Arpana went for four years later in 1979. Although, the exhibition not even cover the cost of the shows. But Mariya Souza asked her to live with her in London and learn art through scholarship. In 1979, Arpana went to London after she was offered Greater London Council Grant for Advanced Study in Painting in St. Martin School of Art, London. She went to London and stayed with Maria Souza. Being extremely shy and introvert, she couldn't lift her eyes on the road. Even Shamshad Husain, (M.F. Husain's son) was in Royal College of Art but she was too shy to go up to him and say that she was feeling lonely. Arpana still retains her shy nature but has gone on to become good friends with fellow artist Shamshad Husain.

However, adjusting in London was very difficult for Arpana. She wore a sari on her first day to college in London. She was travelling in the tube and didn't know how to go on an escalator. As a result her sari got stuck in it and she went to college in tears. Arpana made a well thought out but difficult decision to return to India within a month. "Returning to India was not an
easy decision and I was scolded by my family. But my soul was in India and I never regretted it”.

The time spent in London isn’t devoid of fond memories, however. The artist fondly recalls, “I cherish the moment when I saw museums in London and when Maria showcased my work in her gallery, Arts38 which was opposite to Madam Tussaud’s and it was appreciated by The Guardian and The International Herald Tribune”.

Without any regret and disappointment she started to learn terracotta, casting & etching and continue her paintings. It was the time to struggle for Arpana Caur, because the peoples were not interested in arts and artists that time. People used to think that painting is a hobby and she will not take up arts as her profession and devote her entire life to art. Friends would tease her; so, when are you having one - person show; which meant one visitor or evidence a day. One was considered lucky if even one person walked into a gallery. But she proved their notions wrong and established herself as a successful artist. Arpana Caur explains that “The struggle of women is quite long as they have to walk on the sharp edges of two swords at a time. Struggle of women artists is like walking on razor’s edge. Arpana considers herself lucky as that sword changed its side for her as its edge lost its sharpness!”
Coming back to our theme regarding the portraiture of Indian women in the paintings of Arpana Caur, defined her art is a direct reflection of her personal experiences, inspired by local and world events. Over the years, her main focus has been centered on Indian women, and capturing the essence of their day to day activities inspired by social, cultural and spiritual themes.

Characteristics of her paintings, comparison with the art of her contemporaries and description of her paintings regarding Indian women, have been discussed in this thesis. In the forgoing discussion about the art of Arpana Caur, something which has escaped our attention is her dedication to the portraiture of Indian women.
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Fig. 1.1. Arpana Caur in front of Amrita Shergil's birthplace in Budapest.

Fig. 1.2. Arpana Caur with her mother, Ajeet Caur.

Fig. 1.3. 'Mother', 47''x33'', 2000, oil on canvas.
Fig. 1.4. 'The Great Departure', 5' x 5 1/2', 2000. Dhaka Museum.

Fig. 1.5. 'Immersion, Emergence (Nanak)', Triptych, 12 x 6 ft. oil on canvas, 2005
Chapter 1.
Beginning of Arpana Caur's career as an artist.
Chapter 1

Beginning of her career as an artist

Contemporary Indian Art strives to amalgamate the centuries old Indian traditions of painting & sculpture with contemporary thought. Arpana Caur’s work falls into this category of rootedness and contemporaneity which gives a different edge to contemporary Indian Art and her own work.

Being very conscious of inheriting a very old culture Arpana wanted to integrate it into her work from very beginning almost 4 decades ago, the abstraction within the figure, gemlike colours of Indian miniatures, the liberty with perspective. If she takes a myth she contemporaries and universalizes it. Her concerns range from issues of environment, violence, urbanization to spiritual quests. No wonder a dozen major museums in the world, and all Museums of Contemporary Indian Art in her own country, acquired her work.

Arpana began her professional career when in 1974 she was chosen by M.F. Husain to participate in a group show at Triveni, New Delhi. The critical acclaim Arpana received in the reviews of Mr. K.K. Nair in The Hindustan Times and Mr. Kaul in The Statesman led to her first one person
show in Shridharani Gallery in 1975. She had her first sell out show in Mumbai in 1980.¹

Arpana’s paintings are about the discourse of life. She generally paints on the tragedies, emotions and traumatic experiences of life, laying importance on the woman. She has strongly emphasized on humanism. Her female protagonist freely mutates, to appear as a girl, as a young woman, a widow, a woman past middle age – even Prithvi or Prakriti, Mother Earth herself. Her figures recall sculptures from the Gupta-period: round, clear, full of spiritual power and bodily perfection. The enlightenment of Buddha, the thundering experience of Gautama Siddhartha in search of redemption, is portrayed by Arpana by contemporary means: like us drawing energy from the electric plug, the enlightenment of Buddha is experienced as plug-in. Energy spiritual power and the world of growth and organics determine the active men in the pictures of Arpana.²

She is rated as one of the top contemporary artists. Over a period of 28 years, her work has evolved. Structure and colour are the key to her art. She has appropriated the structure of Pahari miniatures – the rounded figures, the curved horizon, the division of the background into the sky, earth and water and the creation of many centers of activity in each work. In fact, she is carrying forward the tradition of art that has been the most successful in the modern India – the marriage of folk and contemporary
schools. After her sister died in an accident in Paris, Arpana began her solo journey. “My painting were not beautiful, they had a deeper meaning”. It’s obvious. A walk around Arpana Art Gallery explains that explicitly. On display is an anti-war exhibition. “There’s always a purpose in life. You have to give it a deeper meaning”, adds Arpana.³

Arpana Caur is an artist who has tried to bring a feeling of freshness in her paintings and this trait distinguishes her from other artists. Creativity is well evident in her paintings. Since the time she started painting, this freshness became a unique trait of her paintings. Apart from creativity, modernity is also well-represented in her paintings. She has used traffic light in collaborative works and plugs in Buddha paintings. She has used them so beautifully and these gadgets look a part of her paintings.

When asked to comment on the lack of understanding about modern art among most people, she elaborates “Contemporary visual art is individualistic, unlike calendar art which has popular images. Further, it uses subtle lay. It is narrative, unlike journalism and photography. Art comes closest to poetry. It is the sum total of the artist’s experiences sensibility and thinking. The creative process cannot be fully understood even by the artists. He knows the origin. He images in his mind but a part of it remains a mystery. Figurative work is not difficult to understand”. Arpana’s visual narrations from several decades formed a block: the
concrete versus the abstract. Arpana has always insisted in telling about
thoughts and actions in her paintings. She follows thus the tradition of
sequences of tales as they presented in Tamil Nadu and Kerala, and also in
the Punjab where she comes from. The way she tells stories is kindred to
modern Indian-English literature as conceived by Salmaan Rushdie and
Vikram Chandra. However, inside the Indian art circle and in the
international world of painting Arpana represents an autonomous quality.
She mixes different layers of time, linking them to differing methods of
painting. Graphic elements are joined with illustrative and pictorial ones.
Each of them aims at a different frame of presentation. Abstract and
realistic merge without blending. Form and color gain importance.
Smoothness and styling of the bodies lead to level of abstraction in the
concrete, which we experience in similar way only in ancient Egyptian art.
No wonder she shares the predilection for large eyes, ever mirrors of the
soul. She has got a lot of new ideas which she presents through her
paintings. In her paintings, her ideas, dreams and fantasies are all emerged.
She likes to paint the dualities of India. A thermal power station with cow-
dung cakes drying on its walls-the two sources of energy. We exist in
several time, different ages in India take a bullock cart carrying the upper
body of a truck.
Her love for India is immense. She is quite attached to the country of her roots. Her friends in U.S. used to tease her about her love for the Mother Country; she was offered a teaching job in an art institute in Chicago in 1990 – something many artists would have given their right arm for. But she could not bear being away from home and declined. She went to an art school in London on a scholarship but she was so homesick that she dropped out and came away. Simplicity reflects in her life. She doesn’t go out for dinner. She arrives at her studio at 7 a.m. every day and feels ecstatic in her being there.\(^5\)

Today one of the top names in Indian art, Caur had been caught in the crossfire of hatred that swept Delhi after Indira Gandhi’s assassination. But she is a survivor. Rather a fighter.

Around the 1980s, Arpana’s work showed a significant shift from subject to aesthetic concern. Her paintings of 1984 depicting the massacre that occurred during the Indian Army’s assault on the Darbar Sahib complex, shows the dark side of India. The trauma of 1984, however, gave greater depth and life to Caur’s creativity. She witnessed the massacre of the Sikhs and the rising communal violence that exploded with the destruction of the Babri Masjid (mosque) in Ayodhya in 1992. Like everyone in India, she is living with the wounds of the Partition of 1947.
Her series on riots, in 1986 captures the terrible self-absorption and imperviousness of the civil society to the horrors unleashed by mob violence. The series which begins with images of tortured bodies, heaps of corpses and inconsolable widows exhaust themselves in a stark comment: a man unaffected by the violence around him. The attitude of self-absorption becomes recurring image in the series. Her family nearly lost everything, but remained undaunted. “My mother and I would pile up blankets and medicines in our car and go to the riot affected colonies and refugee camps. It was chaos everywhere, but we never thought of our safety”. ‘So What?’ (fig.1.6), from the series World Goes On oil on canvas, 1985, this work, which was awarded the gold medal at the 1986 Triennale, was the artist's reaction to the massacre of Sikhs following Indira Gandhi’s assassination in1984. Her paintings give a radical content to present-day events. 6

Caur has blended her passionate response to the violent politicareality, with a philosophical approach. Simplicity is her mantra: an account of what happened carries a most effective message. Set on a backdrop of vibrant red and orange on overwhelming canvases, the series does more than leaving you with an afterthought.

In these works, Caur explores the inevitable tragedies of life, the isolation of people in despair, and the apathy of the world around them.
Painted in deep, resonant colors, the works are usually divided into three defined areas of water, earth, and sky. Water, which Caur often uses to symbolize death, is often seen as a river or stream at the bottom of the paintings. The subjects of the paintings always consist of a dying or suffering figure, onlookers who are indifferent to the suffering, and in some cases, a deity floating in the sky, representing the unchanging nature of the gods. Although the composition of the works might seem to suggest a dreamlike feeling, the undertones of oppression and trouble make clear that the situations depicted are grounded in reality. But the dark images have some shades of light as well. Birds and trees in full bloom form the backdrop to many gruesome images. Reams have been written about the 1984 riots, but Caur's canvassay more than what thousands of words could. “Nature always runs its course, finishing a cycle. Gods don't participate in human tragedy, they just watch,” Caur explains. She also participated in the ‘Documenta’, the renowned International art event.⁷

On the 50th anniversary of the nuclear assault on Japan, Arpana Caur was one of the selected ten artists in the world, and the only Indian to be given this prestigious commission in Japan. Arpana says, “When I was in school, we would observe silence for victims of the Hiroshima bombing on 6th August. Then in 1995, I was invited to create an artwork in Hiroshima for peace on 50 years of Hiroshima bombing. It was going to be
my first trip to Japan. And the first time, an Indian artist was going to paint there. It was a first emotional moment for me. I was really proud. The letter addressed me as Mr Arpana Caur; I didn't even bother to correct them... I still remember the artwork titled: ‘Where are all the flowers gone’ It was a first success in Japan which took the form of ‘redemption sequence’, wherein a bad event turned good.”

The painting ‘Where are all the flowers gone’ (fig.1.7), has three sections. The first dominantly blue, the second earth brown and the third yellow. The third figure, a seated women dressed in black with in oppressive raincloud above her, shooting jet, black raindrops across to the second section. This is the key to the work, for its figures the narrator, a women who could well be the artist herself, and is the right side up.

The other two sections could well be narrative and are placed in diametrically opposed positions. The central panel that should be vertical, figuring heads of soldiers with guns (soldiers being sent to die), is horizontal are placed vertically, creating a visual distance between the inner and outer world. What likes them, of course, is a visual sequence of a lotus stems that elegantly turns into the strap of a rifle on one side and the jet black bullet of rain that enter the central panel on the other.
“It was a nice feeling to see the work of not me as an ‘I’ but as an Indian artist living in the museum. What was heartening was that it stood out, because of its typical Indian colours, blue and yellow, as against the black and brown of the other works,” she says.

But what touched Caur most during her trip to Japan, which she describes a land of beauty and peace, was the gesture of a waiter in a restaurant she ate in. As she sat there having a meal with three of the young curators of the museum, a waiter, identifying her Nationally from her Salwar-Kameez, came and placed two tiny Japanese and Indian flags, stuck on a piece of thermocoal, on her table to convey his welcome. “I was so overwhelmed by the gesture that I just started crying sitting there”, says Arpana.

And for once, Arpana is more than satisfied with her work, “Not all works of art are successful, irrespective of whether or not they sell.” She explains, “I myself do about 12 works a year and am satisfied with less than half of them. But this triptych has given me immense satisfaction. What is more gratifying,” she adds “is that Indian art has been represented, for the first time, in the museum’s permanent collection that houses some of the greatest works of art such as Henry Moore’s Atom Peace”. 
The prestigious commissioning could not have come at a better time for the artist, who by her own confession, feels that she is going through the peak of her career. "I have been on a high each day for the past two-three years. Every day is a surprise. In the morning, when I sit down to work and then take a look at in the evening, I wonder whether I really created these new images and explored the new territories".

'Tears for Hiroshima' (fig.1.8) incorporating canvas, acrylic, charcoal drawing, pots of water. This installation is similar to one Arpana Caur exhibited at the alternative ‘DOCUMENTA’ show in Germany in 1997.10

An Exhibition of Indian Women Artists, held in Delhi in April 1997, was meant to be visual expansion of the published Marketing And Research Group Publication, Expressions and Evocations: Contemporary Women Artists of India, edited by Gayatri Sinha, Curated by her for National Gallery of Modern art and Gallery Espace, it six decades and the work of 15 women artists, painters and graphic artists and Arpana Caur was one of them and on the cover.

Arpana Caur felt that the concept was criticized only because "It is fashionable to say you are different, that you are a feminist. In fact, the issue of whether not a particular show should be gender-based trivializes
the entire effort both of the curator and of the artists. By harping one aspect alone, one tends to overlook that a particular growth and development has been showcased for the first time. Nowhere else did we have a platform where one could be see last two decades of any artist’s works under one roof."

Also on display were the artists' personal sketchbooks, letters and photographs, which lent a rare insight into events that gave direction to their works. Like the letter painter Amrita Sher-Gil wrote to her sister, Indira. Or the one she wrote to art connoisseur Karl Khandalavala, where she said: “I think all art, not excluding religious art, has come into being because of sensuality: sensuality so great that it overflows the boundaries of the mere physical.” Or Parekh's sketchbooks, which hark back to a rural childhood now lost in the urban chaos represented in her works.

The paintings and sculptures exhibited did not always tally with the book since the works were not available. Besides, as Sinha said, the choice was not easy, considering the many artists the country has thrown up in the last 50 years or so. “It would have been impossible for me to represent all that talent, I had to make a selection from available resources, which I did according to my understanding of the artist and their contribution to the art scene in the country”. But, exhibited as they were in 10 rooms at the NGMA, each artist had enough individual space to exhibit works that had
evolved over the years. On view, therefore, were voyages of self-discovery for the artist themselves.\textsuperscript{12}

Ostensibly, though there was no link between the artists: from Arpana Caur, Sher–Gil Arpita Singh and Malini, the work of Devayani Krishna, Piloo Pochkhanawala, Meera Mukherjee, Nasreen Mohamedi, Madhavi Parekh, Anupam Sud, Nilima Sheikh, Gogi Saroj Pal, Lalita Katt, Navjot and Anjolie ela menon were also displayed. The show was a visual delight towards gaining an insight into a world viewed from a woman’s eyes.

Since every artist was represented by both her early and recent works, every room becomes a mini-retrospective that allowed art lovers to follow the artist’s creative growth and development. Criticism apart, \textit{Self}... was undoubtedly a milestone; it succeeded in bringing forth the feminine sensibilities in art and the world as viewed by women. The exhibition was a remarkable effort in showcasing women artists who had struggled to achieve their identity in the fierce, male-dominated world of art. It projected a refreshingly different view, far removed from the conservative and, often misunderstood, viewpoint of mythology that viewed women as goddess or sirens, or male artists who see the female form without its sensibilities and emotions.\textsuperscript{13}
Arpana Caur participated with three paintings in the first ever, international Sikh exhibition called “Sikhs: Legacy of the Punjab” at National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC on 24 July, 2004. Other prominent international guests included Tarlochan Singh, Chairman of the Minorities Commission of India, veteran marathon runner Farja Singh; Singh artists, the Sikh sisters from UK; the Pakistani Ambassador of USA and the Indian charge D’Affairs besides other prominent Sikhs and patrons of the exhibition from all over USA.\textsuperscript{14}

Paul Taylor, director of the museum’s Asian Cultural History program, explained that on doing an inventory after 9/11 not a single stem relating to Sikhs or Sikhism was found. This was the challenge prompting this exhibition. “Now materials are being acquired and borrowed to present the exhibit on one of the world’s smallest religious groups”.

In the program, Arpana talked of the influences and inspiration of her art work. She talked especially of Nanak, the founder of the Sikh faith, Kabir, and Indian Sufi saint of the 14th century and legendary Sikh artist Sobha Singh, especially his masterpiece ‘Sohni Mahiwal\textsuperscript{15} and the trauma and the genocide of the Sikhs of 1984.

The exhibition itself holds over 100 items including Sikh artwork, arms
and other Sikh artwork, arms and other Sikh artifacts. This exhibition, at this point will last two years in its present location near the museum’s popular ‘Baseball as America’ display and then move to the second floor for a further three years.  

Since 1986 Arpana Caur had covered a variety of issues related to gender for nirvana and the predicament of the contemporary woman. Some of her recent work feature political in depicts the Banyan Buddha incident in Afghanistan in 2000. But however deep and philosophical the theme, wit is never ruled out, which makes her so enjoyable, she says, “The Buddha is everyone’s journey. Moving on looking back, I must confess the going has been tough”.  

In 1991 Bradford Art Galleries and Museums were presented by a well wisher with two paintings from two Indian women artists. A small oil by, arguably, one of India’s first great moderns – Amrita Sher-Gill, and another oil by Arpana Caur, a large glowing canvas entitled Time Image – 2. Sher-Gill’s painting was a portrait of a woman, obviously based on an Ajanta cave painting – moody mysterious, and curiously implosive. Arpana Caur’s work was much more gestural. Against infinity of stormy, indigo sky and a white speckled red foreground the figure of an aged woman, ghostly in her white shroud – like sari, faces a saucer – eye child.
Old age and youth mirror each other; the viewer was confronted by an allegory on the theme of immutability and mortality that was terrifying.\textsuperscript{18}

The gift of the two paintings coincided with the opening of an exhibition on Sikh culture, curated by Bradford Art Galleries and Museums, called Warm and Rich and Fearless. Since both Sher-Gil and Arpana are of Sikh descent, it seemed appropriate to incorporate their work in the exhibition.

Perhaps because Sher-Gil and Arpana arrived together, metaphorically speaking, to Bradford's collection, they have become symbiotically linked. Sher-Gil is now a legend in India. A major road is named after her in New Delhi. There is a loan on the export of her works out of India. Her glamour and her beauty have created its own mystique.\textsuperscript{19}

The cherry on the top for UN Women's Day was the inauguration of Women Mystics Week at Osho World Galleria by the famous artist Arpana Caur on Wednesday, March 10, 2004. After hailing women's plight and achievements today, the ultimate flowering of woman as a mystic was commended by Osholovers at this event focused on enlightened women mystics such as Meera, Rabiya al-Adabiya, Sahajo, Daya, Lalla, among others.\textsuperscript{20}
Launching an MP3 CD on Women Mystics by Osho, Arpana Caur said, “I feel very very small and very limited launching this discourse on women mystics, some of whom I have tried to paint with my very limited capabilities.”

‘India Art Summit’ (2009) has been the most happening art event since five years. An art Mela where galleries and buyers from the national and international platform intermix and interact; the event showcases diverse range of modern and contemporary paintings, sculpture, photography, mix media, prints, drawings and video art of not only the old Masters but the young Turks too. Showcased the work of three eminent artists of India- Arpana Caur, K.M Adimoolam, R. Balasubramanian.

Washington, DC. June 18-19, 2009 — the Sikh National Conference: ‘Taking Heritage into the 21st Century’, a two-day series of lectures, panel discussions film, screenings and photo exhibits, all celebrating the Addition of more than 80 Sikh volumes to the library's Collection, drew huge crowds. Peter Young, Chief of the Asian division, said “The importance of the Sikh heritage and the amazing contributions that Sikhs have made to American culture, art and our collective history have become clear to me.” The event came on the heels of the DC Council's resolution declaring the Week of June 15th to the 19th as ‘Sikh Heritage Week’, Extraordinary Achievements of Sikh Women in Art, featuring world -
renowned artists The Singh Twins from the UK and Arpana Caur from India who shared some of their recent work as well as upcoming projects.22

**Sikh art and film festival, 2010**

The 7th Annual Sikh Film Festival and Heritage Gala was held at the Asia Society in Manhattan from Oct 21 – Oct 23, 2010. People gathered from all over to celebrate and enrich themselves with Sikh heritage and culture.

Arpana Caur was awarded for her contribution in Art by the Consulate General of India, Ambassador Prabhu Dayal. Mr. Ajay Banga, CEO of MasterCard, won the bid to Arpana Caur’s “Sachcha Sauda” at $16,000 and paid for it with his MasterCard.23

**Singapore exhibition, 2007**

A passion with time marks Arpana Caur’s first solo exhibition in Singapore. The selection of artwork for the exhibition reflects her inspiration through literature and poetry and how she has been greatly influenced by the traditions of miniature paintings. Obsessed with constructing a world of binary opposites, the duality in Arpana’s works compels the audience to not just see but look beyond the canvas into a world of contrasts that confront us frontally. It is in particular her
continuous obsession with Time and Space which is successfully explored through the choice of artwork in this exhibition.  

*Indo-German mural, 2000*

There is art beyond the galleries; it is on a wall of Lady Irwin School just past Andhra Bhawan on Canning Road. It is a large mural that is part of the Indo-German project that links the cities of Hamburg and New Delhi, figuring a young girl and boy sitting together near a global jigsaw puzzle (fig.1.9). It is a collaborative work by two very sensitive artists, India's Arpana Caur and Germany's Sonke Nissen Knaack. The mural form, of course, is very much at home in India, where we have murals like those of Ajanta, Bagh, Chamba and Mattancherri, with rivetting paintings that vie with ease with the best in the world. So, one finds that school children going by on the street take it in their stride.  

Nor is the message that the world is one lost to them. Indians have always had a fascination for roaming, perhaps that was why crossing the ocean was forbidden at the cost of losing caste. It was hard to stop Indians from wandering. Indeed, gypsies all over the world claim Indian descent. So this collaborative work makes eminent sense to us. Perhaps its real place should be in Hamburg. It is the people of the West with their criminal immigration laws, inhuman conditions of life for foreign workers
and racist imperial histories that should be educated about the brotherhood of man.

The message of Arpana and Sonke is that the world is a global village and no man is an island unto himself.\textsuperscript{27} The message needs to be addressed to those who cry out loudest to globalize, the world's bankers. They want a free flow of capital, but savage restrictions on people. And with globalization, the restrictions continue to increase like the recent British move to put a hefty £10,000 on entry visas for Indians. This art addressed to them would be much more useful than to us.

Still, when such multi-national collaborations happen on the people level, they are welcome. For those who have paved the way for the globalization of capital will soon see feet walking along the avenues they created for commerce alone.\textsuperscript{28}

The first Indo-German mural was painted in Hamburg by Arpana Caur and Sonke Nissen Knaack. The Hamburg mural is about the Eastern view of time, which is cyclical, versus the western view of time, which is linear. It is offsets a goddess on a lotus, a pot of water and spinning wheel and the spiral dance of life from Warli’s folk art against the western measures of scale and compass, 40 x 40, mural on a five-story high wall, 2000.
This monumentality, both of her themes and their visual representations, gives her work the historicity of classical artists, like the muralists of Ajanta. This is why a number of museums, like the Victoria and Albert and the Bradford Museums in Britain, the Kunst Museum in Dusseldorf, Germany, the Hiroshima museum of Modern Art and the Glenbarra Museum in Japan, the Ethnographic Museum in Stockholm (Sweden), the Singapore Museum, the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA) and other museums in India, have chosen to acquire her works. However this history is personalized with the artist as the centre of her world which has the stamp of contemporaneity on it.29

Arpana spoke to Metro Plus. “I did murals even in the early ‘80s. I remember doing two murals for the Himachal Pradesh and Goa pavilions at the India International Trade Fair. The work was elaborate and got me Rs. 35,000, a princely sum those days. With that, I was able to help my mother pay an installment on the flat she was purchasing. I have been doing mural since then. About five years ago, I did a huge mural 35 ft. by 15 ft. for Lady Erwin School in Delhi, without taking a single rupee. That was to show my appreciation for school, which to this day charges a fee of only Re. 1 per student, but provides quality education. Another easy recall is a collaborative 50 ft. by 50 ft. mural with a German artist in Hamburg (2001) where we incorporated both the western concept of time (linear)
with the Eastern notion of time being eternal. With meticulous planning, the entire project was executed in just six days.30

List of murals & installations

1. 'Tears for Hiroshima' on 10x20 ft. wall in Kassel, Germany 1997, with canvas and pots. Also executed in Mumbai (Cymroza) and Calcutta (CIMA).

2. Non-commercial mural on Environment in Bangalore on outer wall of Hebbar-Roerich Museum, 2001

3. 50x50 foot Mural on wall in Hamburg in collaboration with Sonke Nissan, 2001.

4. 14x40 foot Mural on wall in Delhi in collaboration with Sonke Nissan, 2001.

5. Budha Mural on outer wall of Venkatappa Art Gallery, Bangalore by the artist, 2001 and 4 other public walls in Bangalore all good cost.

6. 16x10 foot Mural on tiles on outer wall of SAARC Secretariat, Kathmandu, 2009, and 4 other public walls in Bangalore.
Arpana Caur complained to police that her paintings are being illegally copied in Delhi and sold cheaply in New York and other countries. The crime branch is allegedly sitting on the complaint and wants her to arrange a decoy customer. When she first detected a fake of her painting she thought it was an isolated case till her discovered that illegal copies of her original work were being sold-of all the places in New York. Now she has come to know that there is this person who reproduced her works on a large scale and exports it to New York where he has arrangements with dealers.  

At least four galleries in the Capital too have told Caur that they have heard about the fakes, all set for a London exhibition, The police must be serious about arresting culprits. But there attitude is callous. When she approached the crime branch she was told to arrange a decoy customer. How can an artist be a detective and conduct a raid? The ministry of culture must take some stringent laws.

Her works have been featured in newspapers like 'The Guardian', The New York Times, Berlin Morning post and The Times of India, while documentaries on her have been made by the B.B.C, Star T.V. Doordarshan, Day and Night News, Stockholm TV and CNN.
Her eyes twinkle when she tells her that viewers in Bangalore are quite familiar with her works in group shows. But the city is yet to see a solo show of hers, "you see, I just do one painting a month. Even in Delhi, I may solos are held once in five years. But, yes, I should exhibit more often in Bangalore."

She had to go through a lot of struggle. She never believed in herself in the beginning but now feels amazed satisfied when people admire her work. After understanding the importance of art, whatever she experienced in society, she projected it through her paintings. She also illustrated different books but in the book Naamroop she depicted Indian women figures -

_Naam roop_ – A tribute to divine, 2006 Digital publication

With _Naam Roop_ (a combination of _naam_ - name - and _roop_ - form), one witnesses the rare collaboration between a painter and a poet who have attempted to capture their respective, and shared relationship with God. The book describes itself as 'A tribute to the Divine' and has been put together by Arpana Caur and Shailendra Gulhati, the former lending her paintings and the latter his poetry. Each painting is accompanied by a poem, and has been chosen especially for a purpose. This book contains 34 paintings by the artist, Arpana Caur and 34 short poems by Shailendra Gulhati.
The corresponding titles of the 34 paintings are: Sohni Mahiwal, Ascension, Immersion Emergence, Yogi, Tree of Suffering, Sohni, Nanak, Sufi Dancers, The Great Departure, Sohni Mahiwal, Nayika, River of Time, Sita's Circle, The Wound, Kabir, Simarni, River of Time, Beam, Musician, Where many streams meet, Mardana, Yogini, Day and Night, Plunge, Widows of Vrindavan, How Green was my Valley, Connection, Body is just a Garment, Endless Journey, The Great Departure, Changing Times, Baul and The River of Time, Offbeam, Tirthankar.\textsuperscript{34}

As can be seen, the themes of the paintings and the poems are common only in a few cases like: Nanak, Kabir, Sita and Sufi. It is difficult for the common reader to correlate all the paintings with the poems and discern a jugalbandi. The paintings of Arpana Caur are surrealistic and convey a mood of mystic gloom. In one of the paintings from Arpana Caur's Sohni-Mahiwal series, Sohni is a lone figure, fighting her way through darkness, across the strong current of a swirling black river. On the other side, however, it is not a mere man that awaits her; it is the lord.\textsuperscript{35}

The poems convey well- known Upanishadic truths, including the famous analogy: the body is a garment. The paintings and the poems are hence to be appreciated on their merits, without labouring at a correlation.
The Dalai Lama in his foreword to the book says: "The contemporary illustrations and poems presented here by Arpana Caur and Shailendra Gulhati's serve to remind us that the ancient values they refer to continue to have relevance in our own day and age."36

List of awards

Her art works have won numerous awards, in India and abroad.

1. 1984 Research Grant from Lalit Kala Academy for painting in Garhi Studio, New Delhi.

2. 1985 All India Fine Arts Society Award.


4. 1987 VI Triennele Gold Medal for Painting (International exhibition).

5. 1989 Jury Member, National Exhibition, New Delhi.

6. 1990-02 Jury Member, Republic Day Pageants, New Delhi.
   Nominated Eminent Artist by Lalit Kala Academy.

7. 1999-2000 Collaborated with Godna artist Sat Narain Pande and for the first time in India, co-signed works with him.

8. 1991-92 Purchase Committee Member, National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.
9. 1995 Commissioned by Hiroshima Museum to execute a large work for its permanent collection on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the Holocaust.

10. 1995-98 Selection Committee Member, Republic Day Pageants for Ministry of Defence, Govt. of India.

11. 2001 Advisory Committee Member: National Gallery of Modern Art Delhi, Lalit Kala Acadmey, and Sahitya Kala Parishad.

12. 2009 Chief Guest for Conferring B.F.A. degrees, Delhi College of Art Convocation.

List of Exhibitions

Solo Exhibitions


2. 1979 Rabindra Bhawan Gallery, New Delhi.


5. 1981 City Hall Gallery, Mumbai.

6. 1982 Chapter Gallery, Cardiff.


17. 1993 Rabindra Bhawan Gallery, New Delhi.
21. 1998 Fine Art Resources, Berlin
22. 1998 Foundation for Indian Artists Galerie, Amsterdam.
24. 1999 CIMA Gallery, Kolkata.
26. 2001 Academy of Fine Arts and Literature, New Delhi.
27. 2002 Cymroza Gallery, Mumbai.
30. 2004 Galerie Mueller & Plate, Munich.
31. 2005 Mahua Gallery, Bangalore.

32. 2007 Indigo Blue Gallery, Singapore.

33. 2009 Mural on Tiles for outer wall of SAARC Secretariat, Kathmandu.

*Group Exhibitions*

1. Participating in group shows of paintings, graphics and drawings since 1974.

2. 1981 Executed two large murals for India International Trade Fair, New Delhi.

3. 1984 First Indo-Greek Cultural Symposium and group shows, Athens and Delhi.

4. 1984, '85 Group shows of Indian painters sent by NGMA (National Gallery of Modern Art), New Delhi, to Japan.

5. 1986 First Baghdad Biennele.

6. 1986 Cuba Biennele.

7. 1986 Algiers Biennele.

8. 1987 Curated exhibition of Women Artists Festivals of India, and Moscow.

10. 1994 Selected for Osaka Print Tiennele, Japan.
17. 1997 'Tryst with Destiny', Singapore Museum of Modern Art
18. 1997 Executed large installation in Kassel for Project Gruppe Stoffweschel, 'Tears for Hiroshima'.
20. 1998 Rotunda Gallery, Hong Kong.
21. 1998 Indo-Austrian group shows in Austria and NGMA, New Delhi and Mumbai.
23. 2000 Executed non commercial mural on 'Environment' in collaboration with German Artist Sonke Nissen in Delhi.
24. 2000 Executed mural on 'Environment' with German artist Sonke Nissen in New Delhi, and on 'Time' in Hamburg, German (Noncommercial).
26. 2004 Indian Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Singapore and San Francisco.
27. 2005 Indigo Blue Gallery, Singapore.
28. 2004 Executed 5 large public murals in Bangalore (Non commercial public art) for Roerich Centenary.
29. 2007 UN show on Peace, Bali.
30. 2007 Museum of Modern Art, Moscow.
32. 2007 Asian Art Museum, San Francisco.
34. 2009 Asia Society, New York.

List of museum collections

1. 'Traveller', 5' x 5', Oil on Canvas, 2007, Collection Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh.
2. 'Day and Night', 45' x 70', Oil on Canvas, Collection Kiran Nader, Museum of Art.

4. Chandigarh Museums, Chandigarh.


11. Deutsche Bank, Mumbai and Chandigarh.


15. Museum of Contemporary Art, L.A.


17. Birla Akademi Collection, Calcutta.


22. 'Where Are All the Flowers Gone?', 12' x 6', 1995, Hiroshima Museum of Modern Art, Japan.


24. POT', 42' diameter, 2001, College of Art, Delhi.


*Arpana academy of fine art and literature: A helpful hand for slum women and young artists.*

To facilitate its manifold activities in literature and fine arts, the Academy runs Arpana Fine Arts Gallery (named after Arpana Caur, a nationally renowned artist and daughter of Ajeet Caur within its premises.

The gallery has a large spacious gallery in which the paintings of young artists are exhibited. While there many galleries in Delhi which later to the needs of the well-healed. Arpana Art Gallery provides space to the young and upcoming artists besides the well-established one. It also provides space, from time to time, to the works of the socially marginalized sections of society (Dalits, tribal's workers, etc.) as also the physically challenged. Thus alongside exhibition of well-established artists like Hussain, Souza and Raza, we can see the exhibition held by young and upcoming artist, socially disadvantaged or physically challenged groups and socially and politically committed organization in Arpana Fine Arts
Gallery. The academy charges only nominal electricity and maintenance from these groups. It also provides moral and social support to help them sustain their personal and social struggles. With Arpana Fine Arts Gallery as its nucleus, the academy also provides support to craftsmen engaged in traditional crafts like zardozi and phulkari embroidery, tribal Godna paintings of Bihar and tribal sculptures Bastar. In this way too, art is, taken out from the cocoons of the elite and linked with the traditional folk and tribal arts which continue to be vibrant living tradition in India.

Today her paintings support several projects for the underprivileged, including free vocational training in the Academy of Fine Arts and Literature of which she along with her mother, the renowned writer Ajeet Caur, is the founder member. This was started by her mother, who tries to provide basic vocational training expertise such as stitching, computer typing and handicraft making for the women of Delhi who ‘need’ that extra income to support their family.”

Her real spirit as a quiet, strait-laced artist comes by her, “I thrive on the sheer ecstasy of painting. I am most happy etching, sculpting or painting about what goes around. Everything is my muse, life itself humans, birds, trees and rivers”.

37
For all her achievements, the self-taught artist strikes with her absolute gentleness, simplicity, honesty and humility. Speak of the delicate balance she achieves in her works, she says: "That is the magic of painting, isn't it? You could call me a colourist; I think and dream of colours." In the last twenty years several M.Phils and PhDs have been done on her Contemporary art work. But present thesis is different, it done in the context of portraiture of Indian women by Arpana Caur.
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Fig. 1.6. So What? (World Goes On), 70'x60' oil on canvas, 1984. Collection: National Gallery of Modern Art.

Fig. 1.7. 'Where Are All the Flowers Gone?', 12' x 6', 1995, oil on canvas, Hiroshima Museum of Modern Art, Japan.
Fig. 1.8. Tears for Hiroshima on 10x20 ft. wall in Kassel, Germany 1997.

Fig. 1.9. 14x40 foot Mural on wall in Delhi in collaboration with Sonke Nissan, 2000.
Fig. 1.10. 'Receiving award from Sikh Art and Film Foundation at The New York Public Library, 2010, New York.

Fig. 1.11. 'Receiving Zee Astitva ' award in Mumbai, 2006.
Chapter 2.
Characteristics of Arpana Caur's paintings regarding Indian women.
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Characteristics of Arpana Caur’s Paintings regarding

Indian Women

Arpana Caur concerns as an artist peak at two ends of a spectrum. On the one hand, there is the philosophic yearning of the individual to locate the self within a larger Karmic logic, and on the other, a passionately felt response to the rapidly changing exigencies of a violent political reality. Punjabi literature was a natural influence. Writers like Shiv Batalvi, Amrita Pritam and Krishna Sobti were visitors to their home. In her readings, Sufi mysticism and Nanak’s teaching of a grihasta padaasi located within the Sikh philosophy of Udaasi or melancholy are especially relevant: of committed action even as the self or soul is uninvolved, even disillusioned. Notably, writings in Punjab flourished during the ravage-inflicting raids of Ahmad Shah Abdali from, 1757 to 1767. Waris Shah’s Kissa Heer\(^1\) was written during those war-ravaged years, and it was such times that nourished composers like Bulle Shah and Ali Haider. Through her mother, Arpana was exposed to the Punjabi writing tradition with its dominant strains of passion, philosophical mysticism and padaasi which go back to one of the roots of early writing in Punjab. In the spirit of early
Sikhism, her art is informed by both a reaction to violent repression, as well as the Bhakti Bhawa, the feeling of religious devotion.

The artistic expression of Arpana Caur is the distillate of a long period of struggle. It is not only the struggle of a determined and talented literary mother and her two daughters, one of whom met with a tragic end in Paris, but of the Indian people to free themselves from colonial rule. This history of dingdong battles, beginning as peasant and tribal revolt almost as soon as the East India Company spread its tentacles over the country in the late eighteenth country, carried on relentlessly till India became independent in 1947. And naturally, it left an indelible stamp on our cultural and expression. “In my women-related themes, the subject is not identified by her gender,” explains Arpana, adding that being brought up by a working mother, who was a pillar of strength probably led her to depict women with a more real-life approach, rather than just an object of beauty.2

The history of peasant revolts made the folk artist the natural ally of the national movement and of the post-colonial artist, reestablishing contacts with a continuity of cultural which even colonial brutality could not suppress, nor post-modernism obscure. But while it seemed a natural enough alliance in hindsight, it was not an easy one to forge at the time. The British and the Indian colonial elite encouraged both an imitative
Victorian imagery married to Indian epic literature, as well as the revival of imperial miniatures, and stylized Ajanta figuration after failing to attract the Indian aesthetic elite to follow the colonial programme.

Even after Independence, Nehru tried to revive Gupta art, which has had a lasting influence on a number of our leading contemporary artists. Recently, the revival of Ravi Varma's art bazaar kitsch by the neo-colonial elite in globalizing India gives us evidence of new threats. That contemporary artists, including Arpana, have been able to avoid these diversions is to their credit.

Arpana Caur went through this entire journey herself, unlike other artists who were given readymade solution at art school. Having made a practical survey as it were, she chose definite options in her work from 1974 onwards. Her early figures remained one of the stocky, rounded treatments of Gupta aesthetics, which she later blended with influences from Chola bronzes and provincial Mughal styles of the Deccan and the Himalayan foothills.³

At every stage, she had to make her own choice of visual language in relation to her own experiences, which differ from the ordinary in many ways. The unconventional nature of the life she has led has helped Arpana keep away from the conventional in art and strike out on the path of her
own. That is why she remained firmly figurative while most of Delhi’ artists were steeped in abstraction to one degree or another.

The incorporation of abstract and textured spaces in her composition was a much later development in keeping with her slow and steady progress based on her own perception and experience. This is the basis of the authenticity of her art and its continuity. Her earliest works are those of an outsider looking at the colourful world of galleries behind plate glass, but then there are works of the mid 70s, that envisage the breaking up of that window to ‘let the outsider in’. In fact, the inside-outside theme predominates in her work of this period. She contrasts the drabness of one sphere with the brightness of the other. What is interesting is that the duality does not hold her down. Sometimes the inside is drab, sometimes the outside. She is her own master. Arpana draws consistently on both literary and painterly sources of seventeenth and eighteenth century art forms.4

In constructing her own forms, Arpana used Pahari miniature architectural forms in a prominent way with the series ‘Women In interiors’ (1975) (see fig. 5). The painting ‘The change of Babes’, Guler (1960) (Bharat Kala Bhawan, Varanasi) on the birth of Krishna was especially influential in her construction of an expressionistic architectural space. The high architectural walls that define the social space of the well-
born *nayika* in miniature convention are redrawn by Arpana to bespeak the contemporary woman’s stifling physical space. The series gains greater poignancy in contrast to Arpana’s own later work of a women’s monumental presence in an unlimited landscape.

Arpana Caur’s art is that of the threshold, an art that straddles the inner world and outer, the figurative and the abstract; swathes of colour and graffiti, the ploys of the pre-colonial miniatures of the hill states around Jammu and post-cubist expressionism. With the calm of a little girl with big eyes who often meets our gaze in so many of her canvases. It is an art that is electric only superficially, while in actual fact reflecting the visual tensions unleashed in the process of trying to harmonize what infect cannot be harmonized. That is why it is thought provoking.

Her works show freedom, growth, and generation reduced to patches of colour, with the human being constantly striving between apparent reality and aspiration. Arpana’s concerns as an artist, therefore, peak at two extremes: the philosophical yearning of the individual to locate the self within a larger karmic logic, and a passionate response to the “rapidly changing exigencies of a violent political reality”.

Clothes appeared to partake of the life force they skimmed across space, fully suggestive of absent bodies (a device familiar in the work of
the French artist Sophie Calle) Even as small drawings of garments continued to float across her canvases, the original concept mutated. Women embroidering, cutting a large leaf, like a garment symbolic of Prakriti herself appeared in paintings like ‘Prakriti’ (fig. 2.1) and ‘Resilient Green’ (fig. 2.2). From the socio-psychic image of the harried tailor, the artist’s concerns now embraced ecology, a yearning for the elusive green and blue of a resting peace. Characteristically, the woman in Arpana’s work is both prakriti and faceless survivor - a mother pregnant with violent sons, and conserver - who patiently darns and embroiders. There is resistance in these ordinary stances. Arpana’s use of the stitched blouses recalls Zarina Bhimji’s installations of charred children’s Lucknowi Kurtas as a racial memory of the violent Partition. However, the image of women sewing quietly, within the acceptable parameters of feminity - an image challenged by women artist as one of moralizing domesticity - is in a way liberated by Arpana repeatedly uses the symbol of the embroidered cloth to suggest several interrelated issues-the process of socialization of the young girl and the ‘veiling’ of her body, the cloth as garment and winding sheet, and finally, as a symbol of the transience of life itself. The constant sense of the transience of time registers in her work, “Painting has given me a sense of relative completeness.” says Arpana. Everything else is in a state of flux.
The identification of Arpana Caur both as a woman and as an artist developed especially in 1974 and when she had just begun to explore the world of canvases. Five or six years later, she began to feel that she was restricting herself to just themes rather than aesthetic preoccupation such as composition and the visual tension within the painting. So, she started looking at the architecture in Pahari miniatures and this gained an entry in her work to create strange, linear tensions vis-à-vis the roundness of the figure, with the Indian sculptural tradition. The Pahari miniatures drew her attention for their ‘unusual composition and vibrant colour’ - their strange, linear architecture and vibrant colors. Progressively, in the eighties, her work showed a significant shift from subject to aesthetic concern. The artist is known for the use of bold colours that have a dynamic dimension in keeping with the pulsating rhythm of life, ‘too’ is her candid admission.  

In her mother and daughter images of a banana leaf in her ‘Time Image’ series and in some of the images in her ‘Resilient Green’ series (see fig. 2.2), or even a Guru Granth Sahib protecting her grandfather carrying his belongings in a sack from Pakistan in her Partition series. There is a universality of discourse in the images she uses but the context is personal.

It is drawn from many different sources. There are images from ritual, like the umbrella from legends, like the woman with scissors, reminiscent of the classical Greek myth of the Fates, the upturned
Kalpavriksha of Hindu mythology, or from the poetry of Nanak and Kabir, as in the ‘Body is just a Garment’ series (fig.2.3). Then there are physical images of the Tirthankaras, the Buddha, Ghalib, Bhagat Singh, Udham Singh and even the popular images of Raj Kapoor and Nargis under an umbrella from the film Shri 420. There is also the global image of a bombed out public building of Hiroshima that the nuclear threat posed by imperialism has given worldwide significance to, in a work commissioned by the Hiroshima Museum from the 50th anniversary of the holocaust. Lately, she has added images from the folk art of the Warli’s and of tattoo artists of the Godna tradition to her repertoire. 9

She has experimented by marrying Folk art and Contemporary art on one canvas. First time in 1990, she asked Godna artist Sat Narayan Panday to draw folk images which she painted in her images. Together they created many art works and it had their joint signature for the first time. It was a new experiment and gained a lot of attention. Use of modern techniques, make her paintings fresh and unique. The concept of Yantra, Caur has tried to juxtapose the essence of eternity with time, the transitory nature of the letter is portrayed through a compass. In the canvasses Arpana painted folk motifs herself, to create ‘dualities’. She embroidiers here the whole universe of birds, animals and flowers taken from the Godna (tattoo) folk art, Bihar. A pair of scissors represents time cutting
the (thread of life, so the work can be read on a dual level. “Behind my house, the women of Shahpur Jat dry hundreds of dungs cakes everyday on the steel walls of a thermal power station skirting the oldest wall in Delhi, the remnants of Siri Fort. This strange, surreal mix of old and new triggered off a whole series of paintings for me, ‘Between Dualities,’(1999) where I collaborated and cosigned with a folk artist (while tattoo artist) who appropriates skin colour by actually coating cow dung diluted with water on paper”, she says. ‘Between Duality’ is the physical act of directly interweaving Arpana’s own visual vocabulary with the ancient vocabulary of the women artists of the Mithila. Series is based on pre - colonial miniatures of the hill stations around Jammu combined with post - expressionism reflecting the visual tensions in today’s world. Caur has created a bridge between the worlds of folk and fine art.\textsuperscript{10}

Over the period from 1975 to 1995, her work has evolved from a fairly close approximation to the structure of Pahari Miniatures, with its use of flat colours and the pictorial element to a definite restructuring of her canvases that are diptyches and triptychs where, for example the water, earth and sky division are no longer placed in a vertical sequence but a horizontal one. Where figurative gives way to the abstract, or even as on ‘road and river’ in which parts of the diptych come together where the two meet outside canvas, in our minds. The colours, too are worked upon the
basis of techniques of preparing layered pigments that are temporary like the water in the ‘So what’ series. Even the repetitive and decorative elements, rather like the folk ornamentation derived from the sculptural friezes in our temples play the role of the metronome in western music or the Tanpoore' in ours, placing the work in a temporal or tonal context. All this is not nostalgic return to the past but its reconstruction to build a present that can pierce through the dark age of colonialism and tap its real cultural roots once more in a modern context.\textsuperscript{12}

What really makes them stand out, however, is her unselfconscious way of expressing these realities as she does in her goddesses of the past and present, contrasting the devi figure with that of a female building-labour carrying bricks. Her art is remarkable in the simplicity with which she presents a radical view of the realities of our lives, using images that we are used to, in a new context. She confronts us with image of policemen firing at angels in the sky; of trees as providing both shade and a butt for a gun, of neatly - lined kitchen knives, of houses burning, of widows with shaved heads drowning in the Gangas; of forms that remind us of Renaissance art with cherubs in the sky, of miniatures of satis, of popular ritual images of god and goddesses, so we are repelled, but not so much that we refuse to think of these things.\textsuperscript{13}

Arpana Caur's concerns have been overtly feminist or woman-centred
for a long time. Structurally she achieves this by confronting us with dualities: figurative and abstract, monochromatic and polychromatic, the single image and its multiple reproductions, men and women, day and night, land and water. She is always alive to the fact that everything has two sides to it. She could have left it at that. But she does not want to sit on the fence safely. She takes sides, and with a very clear perspective of a future where humanity confronts oppression; peace confronts war, and the environment, pollution. Here is an art of hope and of a sense of liberation on a grand scale. And a world becoming smaller everyday takes to it naturally. The lady, at present, has her palette ful.

Caur’s paintings seem to be a study in colours. Her deliberate use of vibrant and bright colours to depict melancholic scenes, show her maturity in handling colours. Using colours with the same informality with which graffiti took over the images in her work, producing a multiplicity of meaning no longer centered on the central images that had been her Hallmark for so long. The other characteristic feature of her paintings is the ‘hollow eyes’, the suffering of her subjects are wonderfully projected through their eyes. Their hollowness says more than any words could ever have.

Caur’s work symbolizes the emerging trend of a growing consciousness among women-intellectuals and artists not only for the
search of the selfhood and the need to forge new linkage with society, but also for developing new sensibilities in art that are distinctly felt in the figuration, content and the use of visual symbols. She structures her composition using some typical characteristics of Pahari miniatures, the rounded figures, the curved horizon the division of the background into sky, earth and water, and the creation of many centers of activity in the pictorial format for expressing a multiplicity of ideas. Her works provide a scope for discovering the aesthetic as well as the philosophical the discerning.37

On a superficial level one might be tempted to dub the exercise post modernist, but her reality is that her themes and their treatment are eminently modern. The post modernist illusion, in fact, is just a reflection of the necessity a third world artists has of negating the cultural fracture colonialism imposed on us by linking up with our pre-colonialism past once more to evolve a proper expression for an independent post colonial present and future. Such art, then, qualifies as un-compromisingly modern. Her work, especially the Madhubani paintings, reflects the psychological states of women. Women, again as a life force, the spine of continuity women as creators and destroyers. At one end of one of the paintings a woman is embroidering the universe, at the other a woman with scissors is cutting it.
This new imagery which draws deeply from the oriental tradition of a multicentered composition and at the same time partakes of the informality and spontaneity of the art of Kandinsky and the Bauhaus school gives us an originality, we do not easily find in art today that only an artist whose art has evolved in the background of an ancient cultural and the colonial past confronted with radical national movement can achieve.

This process of reconstruction has evolved its own laws of motion. Once of the most powerful ploys Arpana uses is that of graffiti, in one phase of her work where writing figures, all superimposed one on the other, create a canvas where discontinuities are physically wished away by a mere putting together of different elements, transferring the tension they create to associations connections being made in the mind of the viewer. She is an artist who thinks and is not afraid to take the consequences of her thought.

In some canvases Arpana has pitted the Madhubani background against the modern duties of televisions sets cars traffic lights and other consumer durables and aptly titled it “Brand New God”. Today, looking back at her career, which she embarked on more than 25 years ago, Arpana makes a candid confident appraisal of her work. She expresses herself in two media-paint and words. Though seeming remote and isolated, Arpana is mature, vibrant and alert.15
It is difficult to pigeonhole Arpana Caur’s creations. The artist never cases to surprise. She interprets philosophical thoughts, spiritual themes and dual facts of life, through unusual motifs. Like a pair of scissors and threads, which have become recurring motifs. Even Buddhist themes that provide an intangible connection to a spiritual realm are showcased through uncommon symbols like the plug. It’s this unexpected connection, combined with a subtle sense of humour that makes her works worthwhile. “I have been using a pair of scissors to illustrate realities – of time ticking away and life snapping up. The natural process creation and destruction are depicted through threads and scissors”, says Caur.16

Arpana Caur’s art has evolved along the path that emerged out of the nationalist movement: a blend of modern and folk art. We have, as examples, the Haripura panels of Nandalal Bose, the folk-inspired works of Jamini Roy, and works of M. F. Husain that take up the strong narrative tradition of our folk-scrolls and compress it into a single image or a series. And now, here is collaboration between a folk artist, Sat Narayan Pandey, and the modern painter, Arpana Caur, both of whose signatures appear on works they have jointly created.

It is this evolution that has allowed Caur to collaborate with the repetitive and graffiti-like images of the traditional tattooists of Bihar, Godna art, naturally. It is something that was emerging in her expression
anyway. So the collaboration between the folk artist and the modern is something that has been evolved by the modern that integrates the traditional. But the traditional is not just appropriated. Pandey actually began to evolve images, like the tree-woman, from Caur's imagery. Also, the need to keep certain spaces empty allows the traditional artist to evolve an understanding of negative space as part of a whole composition, something folk art does not apply itself to today, when it is mostly design-oriented.\textsuperscript{17}

Her art deals with our time; our life in which boundaries and contexts are being changed to meet the constantly growing new realities. Nothing, except, perhaps, the human being is sacrosanct in art, for, the whole of art imagery revolves around the crumbling layers of protection we wear around us, according to an eminent critic.

It seems to realize that motifs in her paintings seemingly from classic art. Scissors are repeated symbol of the Fates, antique goddess of destiny, who cut the thread of life when the time is due. The Norms, then spin the thread, quite like many women toiling the distaff in Arpana's paintings. Train-Tracks cross through mythical landscape. Traffic lights are phase of order and timing. Everywhere in these paintings, find the river of time, from which powerful plants emerge or twisted dead trunks and
branches submerge. A mediating yogi, oblivious of time and space, stands on one foot and ponders ascetically over spiritual eons.

She thrives on metaphors that find an apt use on striking, vibrant canvases, be it a pair of scissors, a metaphor that she has been using for 13 years now, the electric plug, shoes versus bare feet, the extended hand or the pot, self-taught artist Arpana Caur has a way with metaphorical images. In an interview with a national daily, she had once explained the use of scissors in several of her works. "I needed a metaphor for time" she has said continuing, "The Greek believes that scissors have the power to cut man’s fate (his thread of life) which is in a state of perpetual suspension. So, I thought to myself: 'let me use the scissors’ and began using it. Now if anyone sees a pair of scissors, they refer to it as Arpana’s scissors, it has become such a hallmark and, each time, I try to use it differently."18

Well-known painter Satish Gujral nicknamed her 'scissors'. That’s because she uses scissors and plugs in her paintings. She believes that scissors have the power to cut man’s fate.

According to Arpana Caur, “Art manifests all the dreams experiences, and aspirations of one’s life. The essence of various experiences of life and its philosophy is art. It has a story, a philosophy and most importantly a secret which has various elements. In art one speaks but also
maintains silence as it needs space. The drama of colours is very surprising. The form and colour synchronization should be amazing. Art is the medium of expressing our feelings and experiences of inner self with an element of surprise.”

An artist, who is forever unsure for her paintings but look surprised when you praise her work, is an unusual one. For the most part, Caur still remains a little hesitant about the quality of her paintings. The whole body of Arpana’s work has, rightly or wrongly, become fixed in many minds. They are not only lucid articulation of our contemporary state through figures that resonate with quite strength and anguish; they also act as mechanisms of release of earlier traditions. The works become agents of empowerment for the widows of Vrindavan, and the other dispossessed. But in the process Arpana compels one to look at her own sources differently. She takes the landscape and female figures of the 17th and 18th century Bosholi Hill School, and by setting them in a seemingly boundless universe, she frees them.

Moreover, unlike many successful artists, she has refused to stagnate and reproduce old motifs that sell Gone is the nostalgia of the musician playing to empty chairs, the young girl watching houses and books burn, the mother and daughter, the bald - headed musician, the bearded tailor; they have all given way to newer images, newer ploys. In her latest work
on Mumbai, she has made another break from the flat colouring of miniature painting by using elements of the chiaroscuro effect in a framework that is based on colour and not on tone, reflecting an originality of approach to colour that we find in Indian mural painting. Recently she has worked with welded metal, magnifying glass, wood, steel roads and plastic toys; incorporating actual nation in her constructions, reminding one that an artist things with anything he or she can lay hands on, the most mundane thing into the ongoing stream we call culture. And the more such elements an artist can bring into the mainstream, the more successful her or she is at innovating and being originality, despite being in the mainstream that ensure that are lovers will construct spaces to live in around such work rather than blending them into already existing environments. This is the essence of the success of Arpana Caur as an artist.

For decades, Arpana Caur has been a leading name in contemporary Indian art. Her paintings, with bright colours and multiple themes, have been hailed by critics in India and abroad. Arpana’s visual narration for several decades formed a block: the concrete versus the abstract. She has always insisted in telling about thoughts and actions in her paintings. Only few artists of the present Indian art scene have such an eminent influence and are present in all important art-centers of the world... her positive, always active and social oriented oeuvre obtains energy from an immense
pleasure in pictures and narrations bonded to time and space. Secular and spiritual aspects blend.\textsuperscript{20}

Caur’s strength lies in her ability to deftly juxtapose the modern with the traditional, both in her themes as well as her medium. Duality is seen through all her works, as Caur combines figurative and abstract art, monochromatic and polychromatic, the single image and its multiple reproductions, men and women, day and nights, land and water.

The Golden Saint is a parable of good versus evil, of positive versus negative, and of playing with the complementary opposing forms of dualities, that records an episode that occurred in the Punjab Sahib, wherein Nanak prevents a mountain from crushing him by merely holding up his hand. This is also a theme that Arpana has painted several times, and one that is derived from 19th century miniature paintings. Here Nanak robed in brilliant gold is showered with cascading flower petals as he holds out his right arm and pushes against a mountain top that is cleft by a blue running stream, over which hovers the ghost-like shadow of a man.\textsuperscript{21}

Here, in contrast the treatment of the male figure especially invites comparison. Just as the feminine grows and expands to assume archetypal proportions in her painting, the male has correspondingly shrunk and diminished. In the early stages, man appears as the ‘Juggler’ (fig. 2.4) in
subversion of the Chola period Shiva-Nattraja icon (who holds the deer and other life-forms on his finger tips) nonchalantly tossing about ball-like figures. In later years, the man is transfigured into a singing Baul, an indifferent Krishna, a gun toting faceless policeman, and finally a nameless construction worker or tailor. Some time, as in her small gouache works, armed men crowd into a woman’s body like busy spermatozoa, invasive within, and already potentially violent. Even within the chosen form of expressive distortion, the figures are sufficiently naturalistic to create a strong emotional resonance. Notably the release of the confined woman finds a parallel in the gradual marginalization of the male figure as becomes the unbroken “other” and from aggressor slips into the state of the victim of aggression in the paintings of 1984 and the nameless worker in the ‘Environment’ series.\textsuperscript{22}

Shailja Vohora of India with art, who has organised the show says about Arpana: “She is one of the most important contemporary Indian artists, what I like about her is that she is an artist with her own agenda. She is neither influenced early nor does she change her expression with what is fashionable on just to please the market forces.” The monumentality of her themes and their visual representation, gives her the historicity of classical artists. Caur’s ability to always present us with a powerful humanism makes her an acute explorer of the paradoxes and
passions of life.\textsuperscript{23}

Arpana is a sculptor too. She first studied sculpture with B. K. Guru before moving into painting. She also does etchings and drawings. She has painted a series in gouache medium, in which she has shown the importance of time. She has given a message through this painting that time waits for none. If we don’t understand the importance of time in our life, we are bound to suffer in future. Arpana used mostly oil based and water colours in her paintings. She also used pastel and showed interest in terracotta. Her simple looking but deep meaning paintings left such a deep impression in beholder’s mind.

Her paintings are earthy, vigorous and there is an empathy with the subject. She would frequently borrow elements from folk and miniature traditions relating their symbiotic union Mother Earth. Her work is enriched by spiritual metaphors, woven seamlessly into her evocative compositions. Her name, ‘\textit{Arpana}', suggests complete submission.
References

1. The love story of Heer and Ranjha.


11. An Indian musical instrument.


23. Shailja Vohora,

Fig. 2.1. 'Prakriti'
(Nature as creator & destroyer)
90⅓ x 75¼ oil on canvas,

Fig. 2.2. 'Resilient Green', (triptych), 69 x 204, oil on canvas, 1991.
Fig. 2.3. 'Body is just a garment', 51 x 77, oil on canvas, 1992.

Fig. 2.4. 'Juggler', 9' x 6', oil on canvas, 1982, National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.
Chapter 3.
The Art of Arpana Caur and her Contemporaries in the context of Indian Women - A comparative study.
Chapter 3

The Art of Arpana Caur and her contemporaries in the context of Indian Women — A Comparative Study

ANJOLIE ELA MENON

Anjolie Ela Menon was born in 1940 in India of mixed Bengal American parentage. She went to school in Lovedale in the Nilgiri Hills, Tamil Nadu and thereafter had a brief spell at the J. J. School of art in Bombay. Subsequently she earned a degree of English literature from Delhi University. After holding solo exhibitions in Mumbai and Delhi in the late 1950s as a teenager, Menon worked and studied in Paris at the Ecole Des Beaux Arts in 1961-62 on a French Government scholarship. Before returning home, she travelled extensively in Europe and west Asia studying Romanesque and Byzantine art. Since then she has lived and worked in India, England, U.S.A, Germany and the erstwhile U.S.S.R. She had over thirty solo shows at Black heath Gallery – London, Gallery Radicke-Bonn, Winston Gallery Washington, Doma Khudozhnikov-USSR, Rabindra Bhavan and Shridharni Gallery-New Delhi, Academy of Fine Arts-Calcutta, the Gallery-Madras, Jahangir Gallery, Chemould Gallery, Taj Gallery – Bombay and Maya Gallery at the Museum Annexe.
- Hongkong. A retrospective exhibition was held in 1988 in Mumbai. Menon has participated in several international shows in France, Japan, Russia and U.S.A.

She had changed the spelling of her name in her half-French phase, no doubt having read in the papers of Anjolie Ela Menon-she had been plain Anjali before.¹

In addition to paintings in private and corporate collections, her works have been acquired by museums in India and abroad. She is also a well-known muralist and has represented India at the Algiers Biennale, the Sao Paulo Biennale, Brazil and three triennials in New Delhi. She has been invited by the British Council, the U.S. State Department and the French Ministry of Culture to confer with leading artists in those countries. Menon also served on the advisory committee and the art purchase committee of the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, where she was co-curator with Henri Claude Causseau for a major exhibition of French contemporary Art in 1996. Her work recently went under the hammer at the Christies and Sotheby's auctions of contemporary Indian art in London. A book titled 'Anjolie Ela Menon' has been published on her life and work.²
When she began painting she was Anjolie Ela Dev. She spontaneously painted portraits from all around her, and even indulged in making abstract patterns. Her paintings reveal an extraordinary sensibility. The early paintings were characterized by moodiness, profoundly influenced by Romanesque art. The brilliance of a Byzantine palette and sensibility illuminated her work of the late 1960s and her subject matter included priests, prophets, Madonna's and brooding nudes.

By the 1970's Menon's work began to acquire an allegorical, narrative quality but the myths were of the artist's own making - a strange amalgam of east and west. Goats, dogs, crows and lizards often attended the central protagonists. Diaphanously clad women only half-revealed; animals, birds, reptiles and apocalyptic male figures inhabit and impinge upon a mythical world excavated from the artist's subterranean existence. These myths supported by a complex imagery were distilled from a highly individual sub-conscious and do not relate to the collective myth. In an introspective moment, she reflects, "It is a lonely moonscape of my own making, trespassed upon by the occasional bird or animal, and the protagonist is often the person I yearn to touch, the person I long to be.” Later there was a transition in her work from the nude to the window and a concomitant shift in perspective from the very subjective to a more literary
and cerebral mode. From painted windows Menon incorporated real windows in her work as 'objects trouves'. The actuality of the window and its irreverent ornateness connects the viewer to a grid of fractured spaces and multiple images. In the most realized works of this genre, Anjolie evokes that which is hinted at, the unsung song that wafts across disturbing landscape—the unrealized dream that beckons through the window that serves as both metaphor and visual device.

Anjolie seems to have applied paint with a palette knife, vigorous and bold strokes with some large unfinished areas. This technique is in sharp contrast to the highly finished quality and the immaculate glistening surface now associated with her signature. Critics have sometimes described her style of painting as “neo-romantic necrophiliac”, as death is a recurring theme of her works.⁴

The 1970s saw the development of the artist aided by a few exciting experiments. She painted various images of windows on her canvases, and later moved over to painting on discarded window frames. These objects extended into the 1980s, with subjects inspired by a few early photographs of Kerala. During the 1980s, she was with her son in the United States every summer — Aditya was a student — she painted and cooked. The show has a number of personal canvases from this series, which offer comforting depictions — her family portrait is among them.
The 90's were marked by diverse explorations and innovations in a bold departure from her earlier work. In 1992 Menon turned towards an astounding source - the kabadiwallah. Entitled 'Follies in Fantastical Furniture'; this tongue-in-cheek resurrection of abandoned junk was both audacious and innovatively amusing. As the noted art critic, the late Krishna Chaitanya noted, it was rewarding to "share the mood in which she has created them, a mood of venturing into new directions, inspired by the modern, post-modern, post-every- thing spirit of restless enquiry that probes fresh perspectives without any prior fanatical commitment." Chairs, tables, cupboards, boxes off junk heaps... little seemed to escape of the artist in imparting these objects with an aesthetic autonomy. In an inimitably impish way, Menon broke fresh ground with irreverent panache.\(^5\)

The innovative experiments of the mid 1990s with computer aided images were amongst the first in India. The superimposition of overlapping images using computers, photography and collage painted over with acrylic, oils and inks results in an impressive tour de force entitled Mutations. In these works unexpected juxtapositions intrigue the viewer. While the complexity of the structure heightens the element of surprise, the elements of chance liberates and the image from its familiar moorings. Nude, serpent, boy and crocodile remake themselves repeatedly, giving
birth to unrecognized mutants, which claim a life of their own. Underlying the slick surface of the totally new picture are echoes the artists earlier work, reinforcing those elements that have been associated with the Menon idiom while achieving a new sense of scale.

The year 1998 was the most crucial in her artistic career. There were two significant changes in her oeuvre — the first in terms of the content of her canvases, and the second in giving up the canvas all together. She painted nonfigurative patterns inspired by Buddhist iconography of Ladakh. She attempted in these works to capture the rhythmic, temporal chants of the Ladakh monastery. When she set aside her brushes after this, it was to take up glass and mould it. She worked with Venetian glass maestros at Gino Cenedese in Murano and created exquisite glass works, which were later entitled 'Sacred Prism'. These glass sculptures display characteristics of Buddhist and Tantric symbol.\(^6\)

The late 1990 saw Menon doing a volte face in terms of the choice of medium. The long standing ‘riyaz’ with paint was put on hold. A completely different medium - glass - challenged the artist's creativity. Working in Murano with local Venetian mastery, Menon has created a body of exquisite crystal sculptures - entitled the Sacred Prism-where the austere precision he finished object is sensuously beautiful. In her latest work Menon navigates the world of kitsch with empathy and engages with
the familiar image from the calendar in the local riwallali’s shop or the cinema hoarding that dot the urban landscape. As Gayatri Siriha perceptively observes that, “Menon emerges in the vanguard with investigation of the subversion of myth. She introduces the extremely recognizable figures from her own painting with the appurtenances of kitsch, thereby forcing a confrontation: between notions of elite ‘high’, and popular ‘low’, art. All the new experimentation is still characterized by the old masterish technique, reminiscent of Renaissance paintings, for which she is best known but endures as a parody of itself. Self-mockery and sly satire, tranquility and disturbance imbue her work with an aura of paradox that transcends the melancholic romanticism that appears to be an integral part of her persona”.

In her latest body of work, Anjolie Ela Menon forayed into what she and her champions call “kitsch”. In contemporary art discourses, the word kitsch is wrongly used to denote anything popular. Kitsch, however, is a German word meaning ‘trash’, or even ‘gaudy trash’. The word springs from verkitschen, meaning ‘to make cheap’. Today, given the context of the aesthetic multi-cultural world we inhabit, there exist many easy doors in the age-old barrier between haute and bas culture. Also with a proliferation of mechanical and digital (re) production, our dilemmas of appreciation have intensified. So then, the term kitsch today could mean
something vastly different. Pretension or artificiality comes to mind. Concept restaurants and government buildings could be ‘kitschy’, poaching motifs from heritage sites and temples in an effort to draw attention to apparently authentic meanings. On the other hand, an idol — however badly painted — when used for worship by a man who does not care about its finesse, cannot categorically be called kitsch. For, without the subject-object relation, kitsch cannot properly be established.8

“My life is forever hectic” she says. Galleries call to enquire about her next painting, artists invite her to their shows, her students to their weddings, relatives come to stay over, and then there’s shopping. “I haven’t yet learnt to say ‘no’ to people”, she says helplessly scanning her appointment diary.

Her style of placing the figure in the centre and painting an imagined backdrop supposedly evokes the practices of European painting during medieval times. Her figures carry a general ambiance of melancholy, with her women and men’s eyes drawn inward, half-contemplating, half-glum. Her own nature is ‘somewhat melancholic’, she observes, ... “a Bengali trait — where introspection and the dream-state often result in the creation of music, painting or poetry”.9
ARPITA SINGH

Arpita Singh is one of the few women artists in Delhi who do not make virtue of ‘feminism’ as the only criterion for artistic achievement. Born in west Bengal in 1937, she belongs to a middle class Bengal family settled in Delhi since her childhood. She grew up in straitened circumstances: her father died when she was little, her mother worked in an office to bring up her children. She had her art education at the School of Art Delhi, and the Delhi Polytechnic (1954-59). Since the beginning of her career, Arpita has been assiduously learning the craft of painting in rhythm with her absorption of modernist reductionism. Her native paintings are unlaboured particularly piquant in their comments on the ‘space’ of women and the girl child in the society, and on the atrophied sensibilities of modern man vis-à-vis the growing violence and social injustice. Arpita literally ‘builds up’ the painted surface, with the same patient facility both in oil and water colour. In 1991, the Sahitya Kala Parishad, New Delhi, honoured Arpita Singh with ‘Parishad Samman’. Her work are in the collection of the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, Lalit Kala Academy, New Delhi, Punjab Museum, Chandigarh “Roopankar” Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal, Chester Herwitz family collection, USA, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, and Times of India, New Delhi.
The art of Arpita Singh

The arduous task of drawing language in paint has marked Arpita Singh’s work from the early years. That could explain her shifts from figurative to abstract in the 1960. In the process, she has almost inadvertently highlighted the loneliness and forlornness of being a woman in India and the country itself with its seeping violence as it brings itself to a state of chaos.

The throbbing multiplicity of life in its myriad hues is manifest in the large body of Singh’s figurative work. At first it seems like an enchanted world where objects, humans, and vegetation are all imbued with a magical life. We have ‘Apples and Chair, white Boat,’ or figures and flowers where there is a lucid flowing lyricism. Fruits, flowers, boats, and figures all achieve an equal significance in animated manifestations. They dissolve into one another, life metamorphosing into life, creating magical symbiosis.¹²

In the 1980s, Singh’s work becomes even more lucid, bringing to the fore many contradictions of life in India with ducks invading her pictures, squatting on a chequered table cloth creating an uneasiness. There is a Car in Rosa Garden disturbing the peace and quiet, and in a somewhat somber picture tilted ‘The Evening Trees’, the still sad twilight envelops
the evening. The uneasiness and distance is created between humans by invading objects almost as if they have a life of their own. The stillness of her humans is contrasted by the highly animated space surrounding them consisting of ordinary day-to-day objects. In many ways her flying figures are reminiscent of Chagall with whom the artist claims to have an affinity. “He (March Chagall) also draw heavily form Russian folklore, specifically Jewish myths, yet what he was celebrating was not a ritualistic approach to religion. It was an earthy, optimistic peasant’s eye view of reality, which could accommodate fantasy as well as hard fact”.

It is this ability to incorporate ordinary day-to-day events with a magical life, letting imaginations soar, which levels that inexplicable meaning to Singh’s works as Ebrahim Alkazi puts it succinctly. “Are these a child’s mutated recollection of past experiences, or are their representation of the immediate present? Aspects of time, post and present, of dream and reality, of here and there, of presence and absence-all partake of the same ambiguity as the characters themselves. The future is now even as we speak, yet in a trice this ‘now’ has already receded into the post. The fascination of Arpita’s work lies in the fact that they, in their laughing way, evoke the riddle of human existence, its concrete reality and at the same time its intangibility: it clarity and its meaningless, its reality and its baffling precariousness.”
Arpita Singh's personalized view of the interiority and the vulnerabilities of women, similarly takes us into the world of the intimate, the world is informed by memory of the daily and the ordinary.14

'Wish Dream' is one of Singh's most significant works and took over three years to complete. It's made of 16 individual canvas panels and has echoes of Buddhist thangka paintings and kantha work. It was originally commissioned by the late Nandita Judge (nee Jain) the mural has two women as pivotal figures, both elevated to goddess-like beings that seem to hold together and direct the rest of the paintings diverse cast of characters and everyday objects such as cars, planes and guns. Explaining the symbolism, Singh says, "It shows the wishes and dreams of a woman within our society and how these are related to other women through ritual. The most important ritual is wedding, so you'll find a woman standing and a man holding her from behind with both hands.15 In 'Women in Floral Dress' (fig. 3.5), there is a disturbing vulnerability in the woman who sits still and iconic, starting at the viewer while the flowers and stripes on her dress take on an ominous life, almost overwhelming the wearer. Sometimes the textures and pattern of the surrounding space take on a threatening quality isolating the figure as in A Man in the Room. In the background Singh fills her spaces with people, animals, and flowers.16

It seems pertinent to ask at this juncture whether Singh views herself
as a woman painter. For her the term itself is one which makes no difference to her work. She says, "I am a painter. To call me a woman painter does not have a special meaning. Whatever I do is as a woman because I am a woman. My whole development has been as a woman in a specific society during a specific period. I do not know what it is like to paint as a man. Therefore, it seems strange to even say that I am a woman painter. I would just like to establish myself as painter." By implication the empathetic closeness she feels to woman makes her often draw upon them as the subject of her study. We are often reminded of folk forms while looking at Singh’s work in the brilliance of her colour, in the simple, almost native configuration, and not the least because of the wit and humour. There are important differences, however, in that her forms do not have a ritualistic, repetitive, pattern where the role of the figure can be predicted in advance. In the narrative folk tradition of India no story ever ends, for that would mean death. Each character unfolds its own tale and that in turn another tale, till the whole seems a complex web of events.17

A gun-toting 'Durga' made in October 1993 raised on unseemly controversy, all the more ironic because this was one of her less successful images (fig. 3.4). When asked by the Calcutta magazine Desh to make an image for their Durga Puja annual, Singh in the aftermath of communal riots which had swept the country, made a Durga holding a pistol in one
hand. This created a whiplash of fury among a certain section of believers who felt that the iconic image had been vandalized. When called upon to make a statement by the editor of the weekly, Singh wondered what the fuss was about as she had painted the way she usually did. The gun-toting Durga clad in a white sari in combat with a man in dark glasses was, if anything literal statement and one which strained her painterly strength. The multiple registers had been oversimplified and Singh seemed to be crossing that the wedge between making a statement and painterly linguistics.  

Arpita’s illustrations for the *Hymns of Guru Nanak* convey Guru Nanak’s spiritual longing, expressed in a wide range of musical melodies. Arpita highlights Guru Nanak’s aesthetics. Through her vibrant colours and tender forms, she evokes the specific emotion (*raga*, which literally means colour) distinguishing the respective compositions.  

She began her career as an artist with semi-abstract studies, even adopted idioms from the Bengal folk style to paint her women before moving to a more complex canvas combining abstraction, expressionism, and figures sourced from reality to comment on the power of women. Her canvas reflects grid-like elements and she uses layers of pigment to create ‘surreal surfaces’ on paper.
The artist’s colours are vibrant, her palette usually dominated by pinks and blues, and her paintings burst at the seams with teeming life forms and objects or motifs like guns, cars, planes, animals, trees and flowers. Described as a figurative artist and a modernist, Arpita Singh still makes it a point to stay tuned in to traditional Indian art forms and aesthetics, like miniaturist painting and different forms of folk art, employing them in her work regularly. The way in which she uses perspective and the narrative in her work is steeped in the miniaturist traditions and a direct reflection of her background.

On the face of things, her work seems remarkably native and picturesque, “a memory of something once known and since forgotten, like childhood or paradise”. It takes any sense of dogma; yet it is a statement of fact. She states “I paint these things not because I am a woman. At the same time, it is important that I am a woman”.20

**ANUPAM SUD**

Anupam Sud is one of the finest printmakers among the new generation in India. Although she has taken up paintings on large canvas, mostly in acrylic, her intaglio prints still hold their sway over her paintings. Anupam has been experimenting in different areas of the graphic medium, but what stand out is apparently her effortless infusion of
different intaglio processes with screen-printing and lithography.

There is little of the narrowly ‘feminist’ in her total œuvre. Instead, her firmly drawn figuration of men and women draw our attention to the general human situation and to psychological tension between man and society. A large part of the charm of her intaglio and mixed-media prints lies in her treatment of chiaroscuro.

behalf of Gallery Escape, New Delhi.²¹

Anupam Sud attended five print workshops, two of which were conducted under Paul Lingren and Carol Summers (1970-1974). In 1989 she represented India at the Printmaking workshops of Asian countries at Fukoka Art Museum, Japan and worked in professional workshops in New York and Berkeley (1996). Anupam sud has won awards 19 times between 1969 and 1995: In 1990, the Centre for International Contemporary Art (CICA), New York, awarded her with a study and travelling fellowship in Printmaking in the USA, and she won the president of India’s Gold Plaque at the Women’s international Art Exhibition, New Delhi (1975), Special Award at the International Print Biennale, Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal (1995) and the President of India’s silver Plaque at the 65th – 66th All India Annual Art Exhibition.²²

_The art of Anupam Sud_

Anupam’s concern is explicit with the figurative, but the figurative is more than a mean for exploring the narrative, the epic or the human predicament. For her the human figure becomes an end in itself. She brushes aside queries and distinction between the naked and the nude, with reference to John Berger, “I focus on the nude for the sheer beauty of the body—that’s all. For me it is much more vulgar to highlight or expose
certain areas of the body, I remove the long hair on the female torso because there should be no distraction.”

The human figure, stripped to its essence, is revealed, as much as the naked truth can be revealed. This process is the reverse of that age-old practice of the striptease where the ritual discarding of clothes by the cabaret artists, retaining of course, the hat, the shoes, the jewellery and perhaps a veil, becomes entertainment, to tantalize and mock the viewer, concealing as much as it reveals. In contrast the work of Anupam Sud becomes a gradual but logical process of uncovering and unmaking the body and identity of the self.  

We might trace the birth of human forms through thirty years of work. Initially, the artist’s obsession is with the idea of giving birth. In *Earth Mother* (1967) embryonic forms struggle to emerge from within the swollen primordial womb-cave. Often enough, these figures are all arms and legs, impregnated within the enclosure of a rock like formation, or they are found in subterranean passages in her ‘*Time Capsule*’ (1969). They flounder, swimming through the waters of ‘*Whirlpool*’ (1971) which could be taken to be the primordial water of destruction at the end of the world, *Pralaya*, the ruptured water bag from the uterus. Faceless and anonymous as they are, these figures engage in bestial rituals in his ‘*Garden of Delights*’, burrowing through anthills or eating through
sprouted beans in the ‘Box’ (1971) where only shafts of sunlight penetrate into the gloom. “Musculature was something I discovered through tactile sensation rather than through the eyes. In fact I don't trust my eyes as much as I do my hands and even today when I need to be sure I refer to my own body and its structure before I draw”. Sud has said in one of her interviews.

In torsos that achieve such perfect balance, the absence of the face makes a statement, as in a work titled ‘Composition’ (1972) (see fig. 63) which was exhibited at the British Biennial. This was the first occasion when she handled a 20 x 40 inch etching plate. Centre stage, a man reaches out to play a game of marbles while the woman groups her way in the shadows of the picture frame. The importance of the hand as a tool had already been stressed by Anupam. Now she suggests that the hand forms the start of this composition, being used to press down memories on paper from the past.  

On her return from London, her figures are possessed of a singular quality of immobility; they are like studies of still life. The head, if and when it emerges, is entirely faceless or cast in shadow. The subject matter is enigmatic, raising doubts about the identity of the person who, might be prominently placed but who remains passive and often victimized. Consider her three etching titled ‘You’ (1973). The accusing finger in ‘You’ is placed in the immediate foreground of the picture, painting to the
figure of a man, suited and seated behind a desk. The collar merges into the windowpanes beyond—there is no head and no clear identity. Yet the situation and the person are real, a cigarette lies on the desk, unsmoked.  

A broken white line descends diagonally, vivisecting the man into two fragments. The dotted line is a device improvised by Anupam, she suggests to, balance the composition. Yet, it also introduces an element of doubt about the meaning of the picture and the fragmented (or double) identity of the man. Etchings form the mid-1970s carry and autobiographical content. Scathing irony reinforces that sense of stark nakedness in her work of this phase. The most powerful is her ‘Homepage to Mankind’ which casts the muted shadows of the Taj Mahal into the background as the referent to that all-enduring symbol of love. In the foreground rise the human witness and victim of this love of today and yesterday. Standing upon a monitoring box, his powerful frame is strapped to blood transfusion-to ensure the continuity of life and render him captive. Ours is an age of reliance upon machines. The artist’s mother, a woman of indomitable strength and wrongly diagnosed to have cancer, was reduced through medication to an invalid for the remaining fourteen years of her life. The artist offers one comment: “The figure is all patched up—as good as new! Even the brain is being monitored...”

Three portraits from the 1970s exist in oil, of her father, her mother,
and her mentor Jagmohan Chopra. These testify to Anupam’s competence in rendering realistic studies. They also suggest that she deliberately chose to work in the graphic medium, allowing for a combination of the real and the unreal as construed by the artist. “It was a sort of challenge: to work in a medium for which there was little encouragement provided in India, or in fact, any professional equipment.” In 1967, when Anupam graduated from the College of Art, Group Eight, a professionals group of printmakers in Delhi, was founded at the initiative of Jagmohan Chopra. Almost thirty years later, she still works on the etching plate, while heading the department of graphics at the College of Art.²⁶

The difference between oil paintings in colour and etching in black and white is relevant to Anupam’s sensibility and to her choice of subject. Black and white pictures possess an element of the austere; by converting the image into shadow and light–thereby invoking, at times, the values of good and bad. The artist employs these effects to great advantage, by using chiaroscuro to heighten difference and summon up the psychic qualities in her figures. We begin to sense alienation, the ‘otherness’ in images of men and women who, on the face of things, are portrayed in real life situations. The situations now are commonplace; but the titles to her work take on a double-edged, even haunting meaning. Thanks to Power (1976) may just refer to a fan purring noiselessly in a room where people languish on a hot
day; but it may refer to a different kind of power, that controls and executes and the privilege of having electricity. ‘The Ride’ introduces a man and a woman together on a bicycle along a road that seems to go nowhere, but which contains a road sign at the end announcing ‘No Limits’. What does the ‘Ride’ mean for this couple, apart from being an uneventful journey-till they suddenly come upon this sign. The Ride compels us to reconsider the normal situation no matter how commonplace it might appears, as the artist probes below the surface appearance of people and things. She comments: “Marriage brings about a state of mind. Everything which was earlier declared wrong is now permissible. I have never seen myself as bride. My sister, on the other hand, fantasized about marriage”. This comment significantly establishes that she views her images at this stage of her work as an outsider.  

The focus in Sud’s prints of the 1980s is on figure in the context of their urban environment. Streets, pavements of cement, broken walls, barbed wire, and battered lampposts-elements which define and circumscribe human existence-begin to form an essential part of her vocabulary. These elements bring about a play between light and shade, between life and death, as her commentary on people who live precariously at the edge of survival. Some figures assume heroism as they rise above their situations. Take her rickshaw puller in the etching ‘Way to
"Utopia" (1980) who is charged with superhuman energy. "The rickshaw puller becomes a symbol; he takes you from one destination to another...."

At the same time in the 1980's Anupam embarks on a series titled 'Dialogue' (1984). In essence, these explore the subtleties, the nuances, and the give-and-take in human relationships. 'Dialogue' depicts a couple seated before a ramshackle house which is distanced from them by barbed wire. They share no sense of intimacy or belonging; their attitude is one of resignation. Another of the Dialogue series, on the other hand, is concerned with a different kind of relationship. In one of her few open landscapes; two men are seated on a bench, deeply engrossed in conversation.28

An open exploration of sexuality has been Anupam Sud's dominant artistic concern since early in her career. Perhaps because of this bold examination of sex she is sometimes championed by women's rights advocates. It must be noticed immediately that the artist's depiction in 'Persona' does not subscribe to the ideals or aesthetic norms of the woman and mirror conventional image which is abundantly used in Rajput and Hill painting nor would this be characteristic of her body of work and her conviction. By contrast to that convention, we note that her woman stands, not viewing herself in the mirror, but defiantly with the mirror placed behind her. Her gaze is not to look into herself but to look out of the
picture and confront the viewer. Again, this confrontation becomes more complex—the onlooker confronts her naked figure but not her face—for the face is masked. Or is it in the process of being unmasked?

There are layers of meaning that confound in Anupam’s ‘Ceremony of Unmasking’ (1990). Here the woman is released from herself fascination for her own image. It would be relevant to mention here a series of four recent college sketches by the artist, which are autobiographical in content and most revealing. There is no sense of timidity here in depicting herself. In one of them she projects herself in profile, naked to the waist, holding up a mask screen just face-to project herself, to “play a role” of the many roles that she has mentioned.29

Anupam found inspiration in both male and female sexuality and identities. Overt takes on social issues are seldom found in Sud’s art, and her figures are often self-absorbed and brooding. Shorn of any cultural baggage or identity marks such as clothes or any other embellishments her figuration looks somewhat vulnerable and sensuous.

Her work is different from that of traditional printmakers in that she does not rely on the monochromatic quality, inherent in this medium, to make a statement. Elaborating on her creative process, she has once commented: “My print images can never convert into painterly images for
the canvas, as the working body itself rebels. When images enter my mind, I see textures that belong either to etching or to painting. I see no easy conversions as the basic temperament of each process varies and so do ways of arriving at the end result”. 30

She has rarely introduced a recognizable resemblance to her own self in her etchings. However, in her paintings, she often does introduce her own presence as a form of witnessing or self introspection. Often she weaves her personal experiences into the narratives as a way of fixing memory and feelings.

*Differing similarities with above women artists*

The remarkable thing in Arpana’s painting is that she presents realities of our life with the images which are simple and communicating. Her metaphorical imagery not only colours beauty but also gives it a meaning. In her painting, everything has a meaning. Every show she brings in a meaningful way, exhausting her emotions, passions, and innate energies. Arpana’s style is a synthesis of modern and Indian miniature paintings. Synthesizing two poles apart she has involved a new language, a new born reality more correctly in language of art a fictional reality whenever one had a chance to see her created fictional realities an inner voice says “It’s an affirmation of another reality”. Arpana’s ‘*Between
Duality’ series explains it well enough. In memory two paintings of that series ‘Rites of Time’ (fig. 4.16) and ‘Great Departure’ (fig. 1.4) were good example of above mentioned truth.31

The realities affirmed and reaffirmed are ours as much as hers. We are living in between dualities and will continue living till the great departure. Through her work it seems that she is very much entangled in dualities. Dualities of life and death, subjects concerned with social and personal issue has been painted a lot but as she matures she moves more close to herself. Thus Time, Enlightenment, Sohni, Nanak like subjects come out at forefront. Outer realities are disappearing paving the way for inner realities to appear. She is turning towards metaphysics of art to explore human dignity metaphysically. In the age of the hedonism and optimism this movement of Arpana’s art is more rational than rationality in strict sense. Only on this ground art comes closer to nature.

One can’t say that these paintings have no social value, for now she is painting hidden irrationality of a seemingly rational world. She is now bringing to light most important things of life.

Arpana’s recent work brings the metaphysical aura with seemingly tranquil exterior but having explosive quality not in terms of emotions but in relation to the antagonistic forces behind those emotions. Look at the
quality of only two painting 'Day and Night' (fig.4.9), and 'Creator and Destroyer' the time appears in the work of art as its inner time. Here this inner time is more important for it is that abstract image which when get blow on canvas becomes a historical event. Revealing inner time of consciousness is not easy but Arpana seems to conceptualize it beautifully. Her paintings philosophies time in a different way other than what other philosophers of religion said.\(^3\)

Time for her is an absolute temporality; it is like dark space where entities are being born. Time is space itself, her paintings give a sense of time which is though in constant flux and has lordship over everything appears in relative terms. How can one overcome the relativity of time? She questions in her paintings, that if time is universal than how Buddha could overcome time? She has painted Buddha under the scissors of time. Perhaps Arpana has experienced this truth that meditative consciousness often transcends the time experience but it doesn’t mean that time ceases to be. It is not experiencing time as it often happens to those people who are engaged in any creative activity. Experience of timeless is a kind of forgetfulness this she knows that’s why she put Buddha under scissors of time. Arpana’s recent paintings are important regarding spiritual art and spiritualization art. Spiritualization of art is for her never ending phenomenon. Spirituality in art is an event.
In Arpana’s work the happening/eventuality of this event. Black background in her paintings provides the ground for the sacred event to take place. This taking place of event on the black background is very spiritual and metaphysical. Black is being used metaphorically for time, flat black surface is time which reveal event, make it happen and sustain it.

Regarding metaphysics of art, Arpana’s use of black is very relevant. Her use of black is not passive, it is more active than other colours is sustains colours and forms actively on this black surface which looks as though it is the infinite space, time itself! Images take birth. This ‘emergence’, this rising from the very depth of time is an event, a manifestation of the essence which masters refer as pure point. But event never takes place consciously rather it comes out of Qualitative Leap of consciousness. This leap led her from consciousness of art to language of art in the reach of trace of truth. Now she no longer believes in the expression in traditional sense for her expression means opening of another reality. In this opening expression traverses all logic which is rooted in the hitherto metaphysical core. Imaginative quality of her work tries to overcome mediations of ideas. Her work tended to forswear spirit and idea to penetrate non-ideal layers of art. Arpana’s recent move is important in the sense that she is becoming more spiritual but not in a negativist way. Her saying that “I wanted to imbue black with positivity, because black
has obsessed me as a colour, for the last few years, I don’t know why”, rightly explains her non-structural approach. The spiritualization of her work of art tends to cross sophistication of spiritualism in art in this very sense. Beyond conformist spiritualism she has taken altogether a different step.  

**Style of Anjolie Ela Menon**

The choice of objects and images in the paintings of Anjolie Ela Menon constitutes much of the humdrum and the prosaic that exists in everyday life. Their transformation into symbols of poignancy and evocation is through the manner in which they are wrapped up in mystery and an archaic beauty: the ordinary acquires a powerful visual vocabulary. While objects leap from the prosaic to the poetic, personal links to people, emotions, moods and locations also get transformed into the general, even while they retain some of the original quality.

Themes and motifs that often appear in Menon’s works are never the result of that ephemeral spontaneity that dies out once a certain state of mind or mood disappears. Her use of themes and motifs has sprung from their lasting attraction and their visual potential as seen through shape, significance and impact. These concepts require the capacity to be transferred from an emotional or subconscious reverence to a creative
reality. Such a reality in Anjolie’s care is spontaneously evoked – not the spontaneity which evaporates like a passing breeze but the inspiration which is based on certain basic truths important to her and therefore vital.  

Both image and technique in Anjolie’s care have undergone a long and purposeful Journey. During her student years prior to her departure for Paris in 1960, her paintings (mainly portraits) were dominated by flat areas of thick bright colour with sharp outlines painted “With all the vigour and brashness of extreme youth”, showing diversity the influence of Van Gogh, the expressionist, Modigliani, Amrita Sher-Gil, and Hussain. There was as yet no manifestation of the subtle gradation of tone and texture which personified her later paintings. While in Paris she met Francesco Toledo, a Mexican painter, who introduced her to the concept of five layered surfaces and the textures possible there in. It is exactly this method of application which was to gradually become responsible for the surface quality of her paintings.

The sleek black crow entered Anjolie’s paintings during the 1970s (fig. 3.2). It is not imbued with the conventional connotations of doom and death but with her own interpretation of its signification. Life in a small flat in Mumbai during that period with its environment stripped off lower and foliage made the ubiquitous crow a symbol of nature, a friendly surrogate. The same benign quality is reflected in other creatures that
domesticate themselves-lizards, dogs and goats. The lizard is visually
effective because of its reptilian slimness and the cure of its long tail. In
the painter's works it acquires the male gender, the voyeur gazing from
unseen corners. When placed in conjunction with high-breasted women
that populate her canvases, the lizard's impact is never placid. Through this
and other combinations Anjolie's references move from the display of
innocence to unrequited desire or to the invasion of privacy and space.
Dogs and puppies conjure up the frolic and play of childhood, an
innocence not yet ruptured by life's realities. Empty chairs and charpoys
speak of exactly these realities, of an adolescent's loss of her mother and
of her father in later years. She continues to paint the unattainable or the
intangible which is lost forever, symbolized through skies or distant sails,
balloons, and kites.36

Her superb technique and paint application brings much to the
haunting quality of her canvases. This is a fact which most viewers take for
granted since their interest lies more in the finished painting than in the
process. But it is precisely those delicate layers of colour-transparent
brown, olive green or Indian yellow, Prussian blue, indigo or terre-verte
used in a specific manner, which lend the mystery or brooding quality to
her images. Levels of memory and the subconscious achieve their visual
success because of the harmony brought to them through technique.
Wrapped up as they are in mists of translucency (fine glazes of paints), Anjolie’s images and motifs establish themselves first through bright opaque paint which later gets altered through the ambivalence of transparent glazes which cover the painting and provide the surface effects. The clarity and assertion of bright opaque paint is very different from the dark transparency that engulfs them. For Anjolie, an overall bright palette would signify the ordinariness of the present, stripped of mystery and the creative imagination and therefore of no interest to her. But the fresh green of Malabar, and other paintings of the 1980s, evoked a bright palette. She is above all, a colourist.\textsuperscript{37}

Recently, Anjolie moved away from the deeply intense palette to experiment with lighter, brighter shades, even though the images have yet to make a transition. More recently, making a complete change of medium, she has created *Mutations* (1996), a series of computer-aided images which draw on the vast body of her paintings to create permutations of images that are known and yet new.\textsuperscript{38}

*Style of Arpita Singh*

Arpita Singh’s world seems timeless, unroused and serene. But there is trouble in paradise, and the artist’s unflinching eye refuses to ignore it. The tranquillity created by earthy colours and balanced composition is
invaded by daggers, guns, cars, arrows, airplanes, uprooted palm trees and revered hands. The objects are often labeled with meticulous block letters both augmenting and questioning their power through naming.

Arpita's watercolours have a very distinctive place in the course of Indian watercolour painting. First of all, despite the inherent transparency of the medium, Arpita achieves a saturation of colours which is worth special note; then, there is the unusual treatment of the surface. Whether it is oil, watercolour or drawing, Arpita is very conscious about the surface of her work. In watercolours, Arpita has devised an intricate process where she applies layer upon layer of pigment on thick paper, rubbing them repeatedly with fine sandpaper and then building up the scraped surface with paint and enjoying the textures that she creates. Through it all, her brush laden with paint flows sensitively over the paper in a complex play of light, colour, lines and texture.

One of the new motifs that she has introduced in her recent suite of paintings is the architectural element, stairs. The idea of using stairs as a form came to her tangentially when she noticed a reflection, the fragment of a design created by light and shadows, on the wall of her previous home. Her deep humanism makes her register her revulsion through her superbly rendered, tragically resonant images. Arpita through her works reacts directly to the shattering reality of the world outside.\textsuperscript{39}
In a series of works exhibited in 1994, Singh had recovered her composure and juxtaposed her encounter with violence with beauty and humor which made it all the more poignant. In a large oil, *Woman Plucking Flowers* (see fig.3.6), a woman bends to pluck flower in the far end of the lake –like garden. The shimmering blue metamorphoses into lotus shapes edged with a red glaze. The aquamarine surface is broken by brown triangles which intersperse the blue like sexual symbols. Slowly the realization dawns that at the far edge stands a man painting his pistol at the woman. The distilled flickering blue evenly matches the beauty of the movement with the brutality of life. If the preciousness of life is juxtaposed by its ugliness, the painter chooses the monumental scale of the canvas to bring this about. Her dexterous use of water colour when translated into oil has not always been successful and she confesses to not being able to use the medium with the same facility as her water colours. In oils, Singh negotiates the surface with colour rather than with signs and in this series the colour blue lands her the facility she is searching for the varied textures and tones in *A Dead Man on the street*: Is it you Krishna? from an equal counterpoint between levels of reality paralleling her water colours. A man stretches dead across the surface, his body rippling with blue. Could it be that he is not dead but dreaming? An electric blue glides over the surface uniting the space between dream and wakefulness. Four figures stand
gazing over the body and also at themselves. Singh points out the blue God Krishna, for all his awesome feats, died an ordinary death. The dream or reality is a truism for everyone; for all the remarkable events in a man’s life, when he dies the end is ordinary, even unimportant.\(^{40}\)

Alongside the simplifications of forms and figures that she has evolved, she has built a complex imagery and structure. She imbues the play-world that she creates on her canvas with an acute sense of vulnerability. The moment she portrays is fragile, tenuously poised between happiness and disaster. The exuberant colours counterbalance the melancholy thoughts and dark irony. It is easy to be beguiled by the glittering surface of her oil paintings but there is always the subtle hint, like the clues that she scatters on her canvas, to probe a little below the surface till the awareness of the dimensions of another reality grips the viewer. One of the foremost modernists, Arpita has absorbed the tenor of her times and reflects post-modernist aesthetics with ease. A formidable painter, Arpita Singh has left her indelible mark on modern and contemporary Indian art.\(^{41}\)

*Style of Anupam Sud*

Anupam Sud works essentially and only with the body naked. A bold statement for a woman who in every way, by word, demeanour, and
lifestyle, is modest and unassuming; who shuns publicity, and held her first major exhibition in 1989 after considerable persuasion and a gap of some eighteen years.

Anupam’s body of work possesses its own intrinsic logic of development. This is a process in the search for identity, through a long journey over some thirty years; from anonymous embryonic forms, struggling to born through ‘Earth Mother’, to the superb mastery of torsos in her composition titled ‘Window’, to the faceless, undisclosed mysteries of You and Homage to Mankind, even when she turns to commenting on Indian society in those bold indelible images of ‘Darling, Get me a baby’ (fig. 3.10) ‘Mack! and Pick up Girls’(fig.3.9), it is never the faces but the torsos and animated gestures which tells the story. The face remains immobile, passive, unused to expressing sentiment – even in her Dialogue series where the confrontation between man and woman requires expression. Finally it is only with her mask series that she turns to the face, and the face is now in the process of being unmasked.42

Anupam responds, “My work is not about sexuality, people interpret my etching and ask me if they are about homosexuality or lesbianism, but I do not judge people on their sexual life. I like the human body – when light falls upon it and modulates the form, the tonalities. It stimulates me and inspire to work. It is not only the woman – it is also the man. The male
torso is the most perfect form!”

Her reference to the male body becomes the most substantial argument against those who would see the latent eroticism in her depiction of women. Equally, perhaps, more so in the 1980s, her work pivots around the male nude. Four years after her print of ‘Pickup Girls’ (fig.3.9) is her etching titled ‘The Dice’, a viscosity print made at a workshop at Bhopal. Three men, naked to about three – fourth of the body, grow together as out of some common density which blends them. Yet each represents a different person with a different outlook: one looks for opportunity, the second gambles away his chances with dice, and the third contemplates the open to him, while the facial features are sharp and aquiline, the bodies are superbly built and beautiful. The second factor which argues against the deliciously erotic is the stark sense of austerity about her images. Her women are never projected against curtain drapes or potted plants or in the conventions of Indian art and poetics. The third factor is a more subtle device of technique, by which each of these torsos of men and women in ‘The Dice’ or in ‘Pickup Girls’ (fig.3.9) is purposefully distanced from the spectator. Even in cases when the figures seem upfront and brutally close to the viewer as in ‘The Grill’ (1988), he is summoned up behind bars, as the artist observes, “But who is behind the bars – you, or this man? There are always two sides to viewing a picture!”
This also become her viewpoint of watching, reflecting notating that absurd combination of the real and unreal, of the bizarre and the common place. The artist herself, the commentator, remains detached and uninvolved in the situation. Indeed, it would seem an integral part of her personality to maintain this discreet distance — even through the subject may be a naked torso.

In her etching ‘Persona’ (1988), Anupam resorts to a device where she purposefully returns to an age-old symbol of vanity. A naked woman stands before a mirror holding up to herself a mask with just a pair of slits for the eyes to view the world. On the table before her lies a wig, to complete the disguise. It is not clear as to whether she is in the purpose of wearing the mask or of removing it. A face in the mirror reveals the shrunken older shroud of the woman.  

The mask series by Anupam is a break through, to a more complete realization of the figure. With each step, she has come closer to arriving that “The stark truth” is the sense of truth being revelation of the human form.
The main common factor in all the four artists is feminism. They paint on different issues of women.

Arpana Caur's work speaks with an eloquent intensity of the current state of woman's off airs in India, resolutely refusing to look away from the many problems inherent in the present system, yet equally determined not to be defeated or overawed by them. If the experiences of Indian womanhood can be said to be the primary focus of her work, still her precisely formulated analysis of the rhythm of everyday life are so surely focused as to have equal validity when extended even further afield. Caur's subject of choice is women, whom she depicts engaged in Delhi activities such as day dreaming, typing or sewing. Arpana is among those who believe that "A woman has an edge over a man in terms of sensitivity". The repeated motif of clothing in Caur's work both confirms and subverts the traditional picture of woman. Sinha writes that "The images of women sewing quietly, within the acceptable parameters of feminity is in a way liberated by Arpana, as the woman is placed outdoors, embroidering larger destines. Instead of feminine, income-producing function, it becomes a political comment on women's productivity."  

Anjolie Ela Menon has regularly re-envisioned her role as an artist. Best known are her portraits of women innocent or haunted, but all distinctively faces created by Menon. Many of the portraits are of her
friends and her family, revealing the passage of their lives and their experience. Menon utilized the characteristics of early Christian art – including the frontal perspective, the averted head, and the slight body elongation – but took the female nude as a frequent subject. Her work reflects a feminine sensibility. She comments that “My world is far more immediate—many of the women I paint are my sisters and aunts, close friends, people who have worked with us, brought us up. And, of course, there are women whom I respect and have great sympathy for. Then surely, as one grows older, one moves from narcissism to nostalgia. I am neither a didactic nor narrative painter. I am hardly concerned with events, though I like to lay my people bare—I like to bare them a bit beyond what is decent, sometimes ripping open a chest to reveal the heart beating within (see fig. 58). Of course, there are many who have identified with the women I paint, especially those who are trapped or sitting alone on a chair, or those innocent ones with a newly-awakened sensuality, and those who are waiting”.

The protagonist of most of Arpita Sigh’s paintings is an older woman who lends wisdom and experience to the state of destruction around her. In her work titled 'My Mother' (fig.3.7), we notice a woman who steps out of her house onto a busy street (probably after completing the chores). The street is completely affected by violence with dead bodies,
broken furniture, prostitutes and upturned cars. She explains that she had initially started off with painting a portrait of her mother but was so severely affected by the riots in Mumbai that those elements took over the canvas. But her mother symbolizes an area of confidence and strength for her. Her 'Woman Sitting on a Tin Trunk' is a desolate study of a woman dressed in bright orange and holding a bouquet of flowers, her loud appearance contrasting from her vulnerability. The ancient woman is recalled by Singh, for only she with her feminine multiplicity can counter the aggression of the present. The overlapping of these images has come a long way from the iconic figure threatened by her surroundings.47

Singh believes her works, which have been judged as feminist by critics and writers, should display a power of their own. “I like my paintings to exude power. Whether I am painting a woman or a horse, it is important for them to be strong characters”, the artist says.

Art critic Roobina Karode reads her work as “layered with tragic metaphors. Her woman protagonists in their bounded domestic space are shown as vulnerable to intrusions and unwanted memories”.48

Anupam’s works carry an explicit and concerned search for identity in her projection of women. In the etching provocatively titled Pick up Girls (fig.3.9) (1980) two girls naked, are engrossed in some game along a
street pavement. This may be a game of marbles, or of dice, or possibly gambling for money. Electric lights from the windows above flood the street, silhouetting the figures of the women so they appear more conspicuous as bold, intensely dark forms against poles of light. In the immediate foreground another female form emerges, to look at the street below. Her naked body is exquisitely modeled in chiaroscuro, but the face is obscured with her fine black hair blowing across, caressing the shoulders. In Anupam’s etchings, this is a woman’s world, and complete in itself.

Anupam Sud’s art consolidates her humanistic leanings over her feminist ones, reflecting upon the nature of humanity in all its forms.
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43. Ibid.


Fig. 3.1. Woman with fruits*, 48"x24", oil on masonite, 1987.
Fig. 3.2, 19" x 18" 1995.

Fig. 3.3. 'The Magician Story'
48" x 36" Oil on Masonite, 1995.

Fig. 3.4. 'Legend of the seafarer's wife', oil on Masonite, 48" x 36", 1995.
Fig. 3.5. 'Durga', oil on canvas, 30' x 25.5', 1993.
Fig. 3.6. 'Girl in a floral dress', 42 x 29 cm, 1986, water color on paper.

Fig. 3.7. 'My Mother'. oil on canvas. 1993.
Anupam Sud

Fig. 3.8. “Impass, acrylic on canvas”, 30”x24”, each triptych. 2003.
Fig. 3.9. ‘Pick up girls’. 33.5cm x 50cm, 1980.

Fig. 3.10. ‘Darling get me a baby made’. 50cm x 64cm, 1979.
Chapter 4.

Portraiture in Indian women in the paintings of Arpana Caur.
Chapter -4

Portraiture of Indian women in the paintings of

Arpana Caur

When a painting of 'everyday life' by a woman assumes man-sized proportions, and a willful dismantling of aesthetics then painting becomes a mission of redressal. Arpana Caur’s position in contemporary Indian art is unambivalent, her trajectory unbroken. Perhaps among all her contemporaries she assumes the feminine viewpoint to buttress her chosen position as social commentator. Yet, this point of view continually changes and defines Arpana’s placement within a prevailing feminist credo. Most often here is the assumed virginal standpoint, an unmarked tabula rasa, a blank state, compelled to confront an environment of uncertainty. Arpana uses many of the categories of the nayika bhed poetic and painterly convention from the innocent taruni to the middle-aged prauda and completely divests them of romantic nations. This is especially marked since her art has been enriched through a free-wheeling exploration of Indian miniature painting convention.

Arpana Caur’s identification with the political voice that espouses feminist causes is perhaps one limited interpretation of her work. Arguably, like Kathe Kollwitz, she is a pointed commentator and like
Kollwitz uses a restricted palette, large forms, and strongly expressive faces to comment on social events. Again, like Kollwitz, who was obsessed with "the themes of war, hatred, poverty, love, grief, death and struggle". Arpana develops on the disjunction between maternity and motherhood: the one is likely to breed violence, rather than satisfaction. Arpana as a socially reactive artist paints apparently representational works juggles those categories: the social crises become a vent for personal anxiety. In her work she needs to abstract the real, even as she needs to blend the personal in the generalized. The question of the autobiographical content is never fully acknowledged, yet the emotional links with her woman figures are strong. This is the statement of art as selfhood and painting as a means of resolution. In that sense, the artist speaks with both a private and a public voice.¹

Arpana’s means of protecting the woman/feminine force (and she assumes a protective role) is to desex her. Large and strong, she looks like an androgynous Bahubali; earth-like, her contours are akin to those of the undulating land. There is no hint of an expressive sexuality; woman and nature are both symbiotically tied in a circle of perceived threat and uncertain renewal. Arpana recalls herein an analysis on the poetry of Emily Dickinson: "She uses feminity to drive femaleness out of nature..... Dickinson endorses feminity’s artificial or rather unnatural character; it is
both of and against nature, since spring always loses to decay”. The artist has said “The women in my paintings are steady, women you see in your homes or your neighborhoods. There is no hint of sexuality. Women and nature are both symbiotically tied in a circle. I believe women represent the talent force, which has not been explored property even today. They can counter the challenges of industrialization and extreme urbanization. Inherently, they have a power to renew and regenerate”.

The female figure sits against a torrid landscape of colour, yet another emerges as a symbol of resistance against individualization and exploitation. Arpana Caur’s images come through more like a testimony that eulogizes the triumph of time over modernism. Like any passage that exults and exists through its own ambience as well as its philosophical tradition here is an artist who places her legitimate concerns and conflicts in an inspiring manner of a visual aesthetics. She says that “I have never liked the representation of women by Raja Ravi Verma. It is too calendar-like. Women in his works are much like the ornaments they wear. They are either idealized or turned into objects of desire with their clinging wet sarees. These are not down to-earth women who work like you and me. His women are decorated like Christmas trees.”

Arpana Caur has employed woman in the category of nayika as classified by Bharata, as well as demonstrating an artistic and literary
connections from Indian miniatures. Caur metaphorically releases woman from the clutches of her environs and is set free against a backdrop of congested concrete jungle. Ramananada postulates his Bengali tradition particularly the strength of his lyrical line.

Caur’s exhibition on Bihar’s Godna work, that opens at Cymroza gallery, Mumbai, on February 4th 1998 and has been preceded by a month-long preview in Delhi. Work was studied in contrast to the materialistic, commercial world; creation and destruction, reality and aspirations co-existed to show the woman both as nurturer and destroyer. Criticism apart, this exhibition was undoubtedly a milestone; it succeeded in bringing the feminine sensibilities in art and the world as viewed by women. This was a remarkable effort in showcasing women artists who has struggled to achieve their identity in the fierce, male-dominated world of art. It projected a refreshingly different view, far removed from the conservative and, often misunderstood, viewpoint of mythology that viewed women as goddess or male artists who see the female form without its sensibilities and emotions.

In a very different way (thank God), one can sense the bare bones of legend already forming around Arpana. Most people in India seem to be familiar with various flash points that were defining moments in Arpana’s life. Her parent’s separation, the move from a suffocating congested area
to the grimness of a working woman's hostel and the fact that Arpana is self-taught artist – all these are well known facts. Arpana however, is a very modern protagonist. Her own experience of displacement has given her a kind of reckless subversive daring.⁵

Working in her spacious studio, look across New Delhi’s skyline, Caur steers herself to her own island of calm. One senses a cerebral artist who is dictated by a lightness of being - because Caur is quintessentially the observer of human life - the great narrator of tales the artist who wants to constantly break the fame to things differently and came out with an unpredictable phase. As she unravels her works she ponders on the magic of happenings, of what they do to people, of identities, of tragedies, triumphs, and most of all the unassailable human spirit.

Her works reflect the miserable and confronting element of a woman in society like ----

1. **Women in interiors**

Her earliest series of paintings was 'Women in Interiors' in the mid 1970's (fig. 4.1) where in women are shown in the claustrophobic city walls and the crowded city skyline. The body like the city is treated as prone to encroachment and physical pollution with the eventful threat of effacement. This denotes a very important aspect of her personal life where
in she and her mother lived in the crowded areas of Delhi, where draping the body was necessary to protect yourself. They then shifted to a working women’s hostel where there is a lingering memory of a frustrated inchoate sexuality. The women in Arpana’s works are generally huge, large and strong. There is no hint of an expressive sexuality; women and nature are both symbiotically tied in a circle of perceived threat and uncertain renewal.7

II. Widows of Vrindavan (1987)

On a perfectly ordinary day in 1987, a group of young Delhi artists travelled a couple of hours westwards to see the dazzling collection of sculptures in the Mathura Museum. The town, itself rather uncared for and dirty, counts its numerous, cash-rich temples as more important tourist attrition than the museum. May be that’s why the unusual Delhi tourists found it hard to ascertain when the museum world remain open. As it happened, when reached Mathura, it was closed. The day was just starting and there was nowhere to go. Impulsively, the group decided to travel to nearby Vrindavan to see a cluster of temples none of them had been before.

Vrindavan is a place of romance where Krishna danced with the gopis. In an ironic inversion of the myth, reality today points to thousands of old widows with shaven heads, mostly discarded by their families,
praying for a morsel and deliverance, by the banks of the Yamuna, and
yearning for union with Krishna.

Arpana Caur, then in her early 30s, remembers this spontaneous
tour vividly. "When we go off, we were hit by sight – dozens
malnourished, bareheaded, expressionless figures, draped in white, dotted
the landscape. Many of them stretched out bony arms and begged, they
seemed to live on the periphery of humanness. I shrank within, felt
instinctively repulsed, recall the artist. Most of the women declared they
had been thrown out of their homes after they lost their husbands. Often,
50 paise and a small katori (bowl) of rice for singing bhajans (hymn) was
all they got through the day".8

Arpana invariably paints serially the earliest paintings in the series
'Widows of Vrindavan' (fig.4.2) have an abrupt, cathartic quality. She
painted half a dozen of these - direct work - as she termed them in
retrospect. Later the images reappeared in Time series, when the passage
from youth to old age became a pre-occupation. "I was really thrilled when
Victoria & Albert Museum, London acquired my painting from this series.
I wouldn't say that was one of my best works, but it really made me
happy"9, says Arpana.
III. The legend of Sohni (2000)

Sohni Mahiwal (Around the 18th century) is a tragic love story which reverts the classical motif of Hero and Leader. Here, the heroine Sohni, unhappily married to a man whom she despises, swims every night across the river where her beloved Mahwal herds buffaloes. One night her sister-in-law replaces the earthenware pot, which she uses to keep afloat in water, with a vessel of unbaked clay, which dissolves in water and she dies in the whirling waves of the river.

Arpana Caur has been very much inspired by the legend of Sohni, in this context she created a series of paintings titled, 'Sohni' in 2000. Other Punjab painters like Satish Gujaral, Manjit Bawa and now Arpana Caur have re-painted the love legend as seen through a woman’s eyes. She visited Akhnoor, Sohni’s birthplace near Jammu and touched river Chenab. The real blossing of this theme as far as the Indian canvas goes comes in the opening years of the 21 century with a woman artist wielding the brush. Arpana says, “Sohni was a very brave and strong woman and her story indeed inspiring, she defied social norms as swim across the river to be with the one she loved. She swim while others slept”. The woman (Sohni) swims on a pot to meet her love and drowns as she has been given an unbaked earthen pot by scheming relatives. About her series ‘Sohni’ Arpana says, “Sohni was a real person 500 years ago, but for me
any person irrespective of gender is ‘Sohni’ who can dare to jump in the water. Those who can take risks are Sohni. Those who know how to struggle in life and reach the pinnacle are Sohni. I think every person is a pot and world is clay. In the end we all have to merge ourselves in that mud”. Her Sohni has the plain looks of the girl next door but her spirit is spectacular as she battles against the weaves bare bodied. In one painting the image of the traffic lights intervenes and Shoni has no care be the light at red or green, she has to reach her love and then return before the sun series. In another she danced on the waves and in yet another she sings the song of the water with the fish.

Most paintings in the series feature tools that symbolize social norms: scales, rulers, compasses, parallelograms, scissors, squares and T-squares. The juxtaposition of Sohni with tools of measurement and standardization underlines that her spirit is beyond the comprehension of society. The legend of Sohni-Mahiwal is mostly represented through the last scene of the story in which Sohni, desperate to meet her lover Mahiwal, is struggling to cross the flooded Chenab (Jhanan), with the dwindling support of an earthen pitcher. This earthen pitcher, representative of the social support, remains Sohni’s constant companion in creative expression. Even as Sohni hoped to save herself by clutching the pitcher, it dissolved and left Sohni to die. The pitcher can also be
associated with Sohni’s father, Tulla, who earned respect and wealth by making beautiful earthen pitchers. How could the symbol of a father’s honour stand by his revolting daughter? The association of the earthen pitcher and Sohni transcends the legend into an ever refreshing tale of women fighting patriarchy. Arpana explores the potential of this concept and broadens her canvas to depict Sohni’s intensity and individuality.

In *Love beyond measure* from Sohni (fig.4.3), Arpana paints Sohni floating through drawing tools on a black canvas – hands stretched forward as she looks over her shoulders. Her posture is abstracted from the work of 18th-century painter Nainsukh of Guler, and Sohni seems to be trying to make her way through scales, compasses and triangles by confronting them singlehandedly. A scale divides her trunk in two parts. Part of her body below the scale is blue whereas her bust above the scale is in natural skin tone. The part in blue seems to be where the earthen pitcher has eroded into darkness. Her belly has disappeared into that darkness. This is fitting, as social norms often exercise their control over women through the belly and the womb. In the painting, Sohni symbolizes consciousness of free spirit whereas darkness symbolizes the confinements imposed by society.

Arpana’s painting successfully builds a bridge between Sita and Sohni and comments on the contemporary issue of selective abortion of female
foetuses. Arpana has depicted social control over female fertility by linking the womb and the pitcher. Earlier, Sohni's struggle started with realization of the self. With the advent of modern technology, this struggle now begins in the womb itself. Technological advancement has facilitated sex selective abortions and reshaped the trend of daughter-killing. Census data show an alarmingly low number of girls below the age of six.

Arpana uses Sohni to connect the experiences of women from Sita to aborted female fetuses. Sohni is an appropriate point of reference for the present to interact with the past, for history to reflect on mythology and for harsh contemporary realities to engage with socio-cultural traditions of past centuries. Valmiki immortalized Sita and narrative poets kept Sohni alive in public imagination, but Arpana has fused the two, keeping their individual complexities intact. Sobha Singh's Sohni personifies the intensity and the fulfillment of love. Arpana's Sohni is struggling for fulfilment. She is aware of her weakness as represented by the pitcher, yet committed to her choice. Arpana's expression is also an exploration of the potential renditions of Sohni. With this exercise, Sohni has grown in expression and complexity. Arpana's canvas renders Sohni even more inviting for further reflection.\textsuperscript{11}
IV. Earth and Sky (2000)

Arpana Caur has presented a creative interpretation of women’s Empowerment through her painting, ‘Women Hold up Half the Sky’ from the series ‘Earth and Sky’. (fig. 4.4) Thigs painting formed the theme for the special cultural function held on the UN Lawns in New Delhi on October 23, 2000 to celebrate the UNITED NATIONS DAY. Painting was unveiled by Mrs. Usha Narayanan wife of the then-president Mr. K.R. Narayanan. Mrs. Narayanan and UNDP Distinguished Human Development Ambassador and the then-Chairperson of Inter-Parliamentary Council of I P U. Dr. Najma Heptullah, also released a poster of the painting on the occasion. This cultural programme related to one of the crosscutting theme of the United Nations in India-promoting gender equality.

In the painting, she painted the dream of the labourer for a better world or the dream of a woman for a piece of sky, the stark blue and yellow juxtaposed against each other, and the break for the conventional continuity of colour and image is bold and innovative. Two thousands prints were displayed in India.\textsuperscript{12}
V. Yogini (2008)

The Yogini (fig. 4.6) is manifestation of the essence, tatva and ethos of the soul, reincarnating to achieve enlightenment. 20 years ago, she had an inner urge to paint an image of a yogini cutting off her hair. Later in the same year, when she travelled to Ladakh and visited Alchi Monastery, she was startled to find a similar image of the Buddha cutting off his hair before he attained nirvana.

Also, Arpana has never painted cascading hair. Her women have mostly been depicted with their hair tied in a bun. She says, “Sometimes there is no explanation of what I have painted as it comes from within, from the subconscious”. She points out that W B Yeats described this as ‘racial unconsciousness’ wherein the origin is buried in subconsciousness. Arpana believes that the soul exists even when the body perishes and carries with it the assimilation of all births and progress made on the spiritual path in each lifetime. She feels she is guided by her soul. True to her art, Arpana paints what comes to her intuitively.

The painting depicts a seated woman about to cut off her long hair with a sword and she is surrounded by holy men from varied sects, engrossed in their own dialogue, invoking a secular spirit in the work.
The lifesize Yogini is dressed in white transparent fabric, highlighting the insignificance of the physical need for clothing in a materialistic world and drawing our attention to the universal truth of the Indic ethos that your body is just a garment; it is the formless soul that seeks enlightenment. She is seated at the centre in sukha asana or cross-legged position, with feet turned towards the earth, as if balanced and floating on her toes, defying gravity. She is not in her physical but is in her astral form.

With her left hand, the yogini holds up her cascading hair high above her head. Her right hand holds a white sword with red edges, positioned under her hair as if she is about to cut it off with a single blow. The sword is painted white to draw attention to the act and the red along the edge indicates blood, as if the act is happening to the flesh. The long, serpentine hair is a metaphor for all material attachments, longing, desires, and ego. The act symbolises cutting off ignorance and anger and the dualism of self-perception relating oneself to body and gender. Soul has no gender. The yogini in the painting is performing this ritual just as Buddha had cut off his hair on his path to enlightenment. Interestingly, according to one interpretation, Buddha cutting off his hair metaphorically represents cutting off thoughts — the way forward for being in a complete state of
meditation. Hence, it represents an intention rather than the physical act itself.

Further, the yogini engages the viewer in a hypnotic gaze, as if taking you in and beyond the vision. One experiences a powerful transformation — as if having performed the ritual, she has reached a transcendental state of sadhana. The yogini has a tantric appeal, the figure forming a triangular source of shakti. She is the amalgamation of pure energy, discarding outer personification. This is further embodied in the spirit reflected through the small groups of figures around her.

At the top left corner is Kabir weaving a white fabric on his loom. This is symbolic of a chaste soul creating couplets. On the left of the yogini is a group of seekers reading texts to attain enlightenment. Arpana goes on to share a couplet by Kabir, “Pothi pad pad jag mua, pandit bhaya na koi, dhae akshar prem ka pade so pandit hoye...,” conveying that spiritual progress has nothing to do with knowledge of scriptures. Guru Ravidas and Kabir did not get enlightened by reading religious texts.

At the bottom left of the painting are two Baul singers. Bauls are commonly also known as bawara (out of their mind); in fact they are in an ecstatic state, celebrating celestial love.
At the bottom one can see a row of pandits. One of them is blowing a conch shell. Sound of conch shells is believed to dispel negativity. On the right, we can see Mardana playing a rabab with a fellow listener and another person who is bowing down. It signifies complete submission of the self, identifying oneself as mere dust. Next is a Muslim pir sitting in ibadat and just above him a group of Sikh Sadhus. At the top right corner of the canvas, we see a figure pointing towards the sky. Arpana says he is silently gesturing Ek Tu Hi.

The underlying pulsating essence of the painting is to draw our attention towards the sublime intention, rather than delineating the relationship with the physical act or form. The artist engages the viewer so that he goes into contemplation, breaking away from all duality, transcending flesh and bone.

Apart from these series there are so many paintings and series in which she depicted Indian women figures, Arpana has candidly expressed situations of life, dealing particularly with women’s predicament and the increasing violence in our society, such as in her series of paintings entitled ‘Women’. She has made concerned statements on socio-political events. Since she is passionately aware of man and this predicament, her paintings are images of the pungent truth of life. Arpana Caur has always
preoccupied herself with the cause that she holds closest to her heart— the
plight of women in India.

She is passionate about the environment and all those marginalized
in society. She feels pain on seeing such people in society and projecting
their miseries somehow gives her a little relief. She has always gives
preference to social issues on her canvas. In 1970, she created a series
called _Maid Servant_, about the mistress-servant relationship, where one
has everything and the other nothing. In this series she represents social
inequality in society. She paints the life of labourous workers who worked
hard to earn. Arpana Caur feels too depressed to see miserable condition of
women servants, then she painted the pain of women in her canvases and
some of the paintings of this series were published by Faiz Ahmed Faiz in
_Lotus_ magazine. Similarly, in her other work it is a protective device,
starting out as a distinguishing feature in images of women, who are
protected and those, who are not. In _The Sheltered Women_ series
(fig.4.7), it takes the form of a human being. In this series, some women
are shown under the umbrella, while labour class women are shown with
wrinkled and dark faces without umbrella. One of these paintings is
hanging in the Chandigarh Museum.13

In 1975 she created _The Child Goddess_, where she portrays a nude
girl lecturing to several nude figures that are immersed in their own
concerns and not listening to her. They could well be statues. These images appear to contain the germ of a future series in them; the one of a performer without an audience. They recur again and again in different contexts in her works, growing in subtlety and sensitivity over the years.

Her work is sophisticated, intense, and anything but native. A touch of surrealism, a touch of Gauguin with deep Indian roots, and her work is a rare cross-culture success. She projected her experience through paintings. She thinks, “An artist is always sensitive towards his / her society.”

In 1989, an exhibition organized by Sahmat, a cultural activist group in Delhi, slum provoked her to draw the elements of the city’s freewheeling mechanical and human detritus as grey graffiti scrawl busily working itself into the background of her series ‘Threatened City’ (fig.4.8). These figures are placed in various corners of her canvas; as though they are so insignificant as to merit no attention, thereby reinforcing their strong invasive presence and strangle-hold on the city, the progression from closed interior to billowing landscapes initiate the progression of the crowded city.

Her work is also about cities and people whose extraordinariness is contextualized by the familiar frameworks that we instantly recognize. The female figure then becomes the narrator - her voice is her expressionism -
it is at once expansive, intimate, soulful and sensuous. Whether she is at crossroads or at a stilted point in her life, she marks the course of divergent phases. She states, "Art is the medium of expressing our feelings and experiences of inner self with an element of surprise". Caur plays with images that go back in time to generations of bygone eras. She also weaves into that plot an image of the urban consumerist culture. What results is a consecration of the unique and the alien. Her harmony too reflects that singularity the image in question, whether it, be a traffic light, the folk idiom of Warli or Godna or even the rustic old village belle, the image becomes the autonomous self sufficient symbol of struggle and strength.

The number of canvases that she produces may have increased. But it's not quantity that matters to Caur, what she is most pleased about is that the quality of her works is improving and that her paintings are now imbued with a sense of adventure, in which new boundaries are constantly being explored. Arpana Caur's drawings are delicate studies where the human and the divine eclipse.¹⁵

Series 'Threat' (1989) reflects the role of women in society. In this series she paints trigger - happy policeman aiming guns at innocent women. In one of these paintings, she creates a women is embroidering flowers in to a shawl while sharp knives hover threateningly over her.

She paints the endless cycles of creation and distraction, titled 'Day
and Night', since 1990 (fig.4.9). When Night sleeps, Day takes over with its many activities, repeated one after another in a ritual of work. The repetition of the motif as in miniatures or in Buddhist art creates a sense of continuity and visual design. "I have never seen anybody's paintings on day and night. So about twenty three years back, I decide to paint on day and night", says Arpana.

Her favourite work she says is the Day and Night series, a subject untouched by any other artist. An everyday phenomenon, Arpana captures the shift in time by drawing a woman in yellow embroidering and a woman in black cutting a thread.

She has also painted many paintings since 1994, under the series titled 'Time Image'. It is another recurring motif and preoccupation in Caur's work. "Today life of people has become very hectic and unmanageable. They are running continuously from one pole to another. I do not like to think of time dictating my life since I see it as this vast expanse where day and night are cyclical and broken up into hours, minutes and seconds. Yet I am reminded of my own morality", says Caur. Her painting 'Time Go Slow' (fig.4.10) is perhaps one of the best examples this; here a woman and her shadow seem to be weaving time. While the woman weaves the circle of line with tiny dancing Warli figures attached to it, the shadow cuts it and this is the cycle of day and night, life and death.
played out against a flaming red canvas, Arpana Caur affiliates to this prominent school of time explores. "I am obsessed with the phenomenon of time", she said once, and her pictures are witness to this obsession in many ways.\textsuperscript{16}

Artist Arpana Caur says she feels a close connection with trees. Her relationship with trees perhaps began as a 10-year-old, when she read a Punjabi poem, titled \textit{Rukh}, by Shiv Kumar Batalvi. It became a part of her consciousness. Arana’s sublime relationship with trees is reflected in most of her paintings, wherein she herself becomes the tree and narrates personal mystical experiences. In the ‘Tree of Life’ (1996) painting, Arpana presents a stark black tree laden with the torsos of women. This is superimposed with a dream – like with fulfilling tree an inverted position.

Why is the black tree laden with female torsos? Arpana explains, “I saw the image of a painting with little heads of humans and animals suspended from branches in a famous book on Persian art, The Speaking Tree by Richard Lannon. The tree was called the \textit{Waq Waq Tree}. One of these curious trees with animal heads is also seen in the Miniature Museum at Academy of Fine Arts and Literature, Delhi. I find the tree intriguing”.

On the depiction of women’s torsos, Arpana says, “The torsos depict that human life is like the leaves that are that are vulnerable, caught in the ceaseless cycle of creation and recreation”. Perhaps she sub-consciously
chose female torsos because like Prakriti (nature), women, too have the inherent shakti (power) of the Creator.\textsuperscript{17}

One such series is the ‘Body Is Just A Garment’ (fig.2.3) that she revisited after 17 years. She had first done the series in 1993, wherein she had displayed 33 paintings and six terracotta sculptures on the theme. She says she was inspired by Sant Kabir, who was a weaver by profession. And a lot of metaphors like tana bana, vastra and dhaga were used in that series as she associated these with Kabir, who had used them in his couplets to spread wisdom. And he would tell common men not to get attached to worldly things which are just like garments — as the body is nothing more than a garment for the soul.

“In the Bhagavad Gita, when Arjuna hesitates to fight and is unable to lift his weapons against his brothers and relatives, Krishna says to him: Do not grieve; the body is just a garment,” recollects Arpana. She also remembers her grandfather’s words to her when she was a child: \textit{Sukh dhuk jive kapade, pahre aaye manukh}. — Happiness and sorrow are like clothes, it is man who came first. Hence, says Arpana, she never did get attached to the idea of giving importance to clothes materialistically; she finds the spiritual import of the concept of body as garment spiritually inspiring. The journey that began as a child has manifested in her paintings in the series aptly titled: ‘Body Is Just a Garment’.
The first painting from this series was a triptych—three canvases put together. In the first, she had painted a darzi—a tailor—sewing clothes, in the second part, a body trapped in clothes and in the third part, there is a head in one corner and the clothes are at the bottom of the canvas. She goes on to explain that the Creator makes beautiful bodies for the embodiment of the soul and then we get trapped in the physicality of these bodies, forgetting the soul. However, in the end, when we are able to shed the clothes or break free of them, we find that we are able to liberate ourselves. In this series of works, we will always find the presence of the garment to denote the physical body.18

In the late Eighties, the 1984 communal 'massacre' (her series on the Sikh genocide ‘World Goes On’ was shown by E. Elkazi in Art Heritage Gallery in Delhi in 1985 and traveled to Mumbai and Calcutta in 1986.) in the capital city of India prompted her to paint the gory face of death. Also disturbed by the changing face of New Delhi, she started visually expressing her environmental concerns. She began to paint 'Environment' series. In 1995, she attended the 'Nature and Environment' workshop jointly organized by the Lalit Kala Akademi, Max Mueller Bhavan and Japan Foundation. In one painting of this series titled ‘Prakriti,’ (1992), she painted nature as the creator and destroyer simultaneously, and individuals are her temporary harvest. She says, “I am
interested in representing the forces of nature and spirituality: both seem threatened in our present times”. The harvest motifs are from Warli paintings, with multiple images again and again emphasizing the cyclical flow of the process of creation and destruction. And the other painting from this series shows the green embroiderer is Nature, also carrying within herself the seeds of destruction in order to recreate or re-embroider again. In 1999 she creates a collection of works titled ‘Rites of time’ (fig.4.16) that investigates the replacement of technology as our new gods and deities.\(^{19}\)

As a sensitive artist, Arpana is a gentle activist. But, she says, some issues make her angry. She fights them in the courts and through her works. Her paintings on environmental issues began in 1988, when she made the first in a series titled ‘Green Circle’; (fig.4.11) Sita is drawing the green circle around herself. Sita being the daughter of Dharti (earth) (fig.4.13) is the active metaphor. Recently Arpana went to court when an old forest in South Delhi was cut for the Commonwealth Games. The dead peacocks ravaged by dogs feature in her works called ‘Ghosts’. Restoration of monuments is another cause that she actively fights for.

In another work, titled ‘Harvest’, (fig.4.12) Caur uses the binary of colours to explore the different forms of femininity in traditional Indian thought. "The green feminine form is the creator and the red, the
destructor. This work shows that every woman has these energies that is also present in nature itself — the restorer and the destructor. Women are supposed to be passive but that is not so, they can multi-task and efficiently so." She serves as a link between the growth figures and actual poverty, progress and backwardness, innovation and stagnation that characterize two faces of the same reality. Her art highlights their inter-connectedness and forces one to asses them as two sides of the same coin and to question them. Arpana's paintings have always been about what and how she feels. They are not about what sells. Arpana has always insisted in expressing her thoughts and actions through her paintings.

No wonder, at 60, she feels like a 14-year-old and paints with the same enthusiasm and is ever eager to learn, "I am no Leonardo or Michelangelo ... I try to improve every day." And innovate, too. She has a heart that despite an open-heart surgery bleeds for the cause of environment, people, tigers, peacocks, migrant labour ... the list of her interests is endless. No wonder, though her work is definitely marked by womanly sensitivity and sensibility, she doesn’t care to be clubbed a woman artist. "Issues that I tackle go far beyond the conventional feminist perspective." her art is in essence about the uncanny knack of bringing it all together. It was only natural, then, that she was moved to create an installation depicting the horror of the recent gang rape in Delhi, which
was shown in both Delhi and Kochi this year (2012). "I painted against gang rape for the first time, 33 years ago, when I'd heard about the Maya Tyagi rape case. She was raped by police in broad day light while travelling with her husband and brother-in-law, who were shot dead. If India were a police state, I would have not been able to show that series. But it was shown and it was published, I did this series in 1979 called 'Custodians of the Law'. Even after all those years, nothing seems to have changed." My Painting is called 'Stepping out' (fig.4.15) and it is dedicated to all injustices that are palled out against women. "She adds "Women are teared, humialted, molested in busses, but nothing seems to change" she says. "It was exhibited at my first solo show and bought by M.F. Husain."

Thus tradition and modernity, everyday reality and spiritualism, love and the ability to transcend inhabit her artistic space. That explains why one can sense a perfect harmony both in her work and her being that otherwise often goes fighting court battles for concerns dear to her. An irresolute determination backed by a heart of gold ...? Only, this Punjabian doesn't see herself as a crusader but a human being who finds it impossible to shut her eyes to the reality around her. So, she responds to it, both in her art and life. With all humility, she admits, "My cups are full." So, she stands fulfilled. My work shows the suffering and the strength of women, and it strives to humanize them, where violence and patriarchy continue to dehumanize them.
Arpana Caur believes that up till now the women that represent the underlying force hasn’t been explored properly. The females in her paintings are fates, norms and goddesses of destiny at once. The activity of her amazing female related not limited only to philosophical and religious significance but broadens all the time into political and social significance. For instance, in one of her recent paintings titled ‘Walking Woman’, the woman portrayed leaves the grounds of her home in order to stride away into the open, into the green, into an active life. But at the same time she is anxious because tradition obstructs her daring steps. This is the situation of most Indian women. The painting is an intelligent depiction of the situation of women in general, represented so clearly by a timeless presentation. Arpana represents an independent quality. She depicts Indian women, where each one aims at a different frame of presentation. There are only a few artists in the current modern art scenario in India that have such a prominent influence and can be seen in all important art-centers of the world.
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Fig. 4.1. 'Women in Interiors', 70"x60", 1982 oil on canvas. Collection: Thomas Friedman.

Fig. 4.2. 'Widows of Vrindavan', 5'x 6", oil on canvas, 1987. Collection: Dhoomimal Gallery.
Fig. 4.3. 'Love Beyond Measure: Sohni', 6 x 7 ft, 2009.

Fig. 4.4. 'Women hold up half the sky', diptych, 5' x 5', 2000.
Fig. 4.6. 'Yogini', 4.5 x 5.5ft, oil on canvas, 2008.

Fig. 4.7. 'The Sheltered Woman', 66" x 60", 1980, oil on canvas.
Collection: Chandigarh Museum.
Fig. 4.8. 'Threatened City', Diptych 10x6 ft 1994-95, oil on canvas.

Fig. 4.9. 'Day and Night', 9x6 ft, Oil on Canvas, 2011. Collection-Kiran Nader Museum of Art.
Fig. 4.10. ‘Time Goes Slow’, 2009, oil on canvas.

Fig. 4.11. Green circle, 42 x 30”, oil on canvas, 2013.
Fig. 4.12. 'Harvest', NGMA Delhi, 4 1/2 x 5 1/2 ft, 1999.

Fig. 4.13. 'Dharti', oil on canvas, 4 x 7 ft, 2008.
Fig 4.15 'Stepping out', 60\textquotesingle x 70\textquotesingle, oil on canvas, 2012.

Fig. 4.16. 'Rites of Times', 6 x 6 ft, 2000.
Cordial Meetings with Arpana Caur
Conclusion
CONCLUSION

Thus we can say that Arpana Caur is a leading contemporary artist of India who paints Indian women’s condition minutely in her paintings. Arpana Caur, however used her experiences to protect the women. She “desexes” her women in order to protect them. Large and strong figures, (athreya)their earth-like contours continuing the undulation of the landscape around them, women and nature are tied in a circle of perceived threat and uncertain renewal. There is no hint of expressive sexuality in her figures.

She almost always paints in series, as if, for her subjects, just one painting is not enough. Instead, a series is required to tell her story and reach out to the audience. Arpana’s paintings have very aggressive women as subjects, women who are not ashamed of taking up their own space, space that is rightly theirs. This idea is a direct rebuttal of society’s means of restricting women with heavy clothing and correct modes of dressing, sitting, and general behavior.

Arpana Cour’s artwork also shows miniature painting influences in the grouping of figures in her paintings. She used that format as an interrogation of social hierarchies. Women compressed into the body of a horse, or an elephant, as in seventeenth / eighteenth century Rajput
paintings, in order to bear the male patron on his sojourn, turn into harsh images of deliberate oppression. The decorative intent in miniature painting of depicting women in a series is turned into a monotony of drudgery and suffering. She turns women from the profile view and they comfort the viewer full face with a sightless, tragic eye, almost an assault of the viewer’s senses in their silent interrogation and confrontational gaze. Male figures tend to shrink and diminished in her painting while the feminine grows and expand to assume archetypal proportion. Sometimes armed men crowd into a woman’s body, invasive within, and already potentially violent. Even with the expressive distortion of her figures, male and female are sufficiently naturalistic to create a strong emotional resonance. The release of the confined woman is paralleled by the gradual marginalization of the male figure, as the unknown other, slipping from the aggressor into the victim of aggression in some of her work.

Her vibrantly coloured canvases, with their instantly recognizable style that makes references to earlier Indian miniature and folk traditions, employ repeated sets of motifs in their allegorical treatment of a wide range of themes: embroidery and spinning becoming, for example, metaphors of life and creativity, while the scissors that frequently appear also, image the forces that curtail them. In many of the pieces on display, woman is portrayed as the central actor on the human stage, the one who
bears life, nurtures and supports it through its long development and ultimately defends it against the imimical forces concentrated by tragedy, greed corruption, environmental destruction and the thousand other shocks to which humans are subjected.

The grouping of figures of the miniature format is also adopted by Arpana for an interrogation of social hierarchies. Most often women in replica, initiated with the *Widows of Vrindavan* series are used to drive home the social and individual dimension. The Hayanari device of seventeenth-eighteenth century, Rajput painting also seen in Orissa art - in which women are compressed into the body of a horse, or an elephant as in the Gajanari style, usually to bear a male patron on his sojourn - is subverted deliberately as an image of oppression. Still later, the woman figure appears with serial regularity. However, whereas in the miniature format the intent is decorative, in Arpana’s hand the half a dozen women who appear single file, heading out of the picture’s frame to nowhere in particular bespeak a faceless drudgery and monotony. Then again, she turns them out of profile to confront the viewer full face with a sightless, tragic gaze. In evoking the direct confrontational gaze, Arpana introduces a Brechtian note in her work. The references to myth, to the disappearing Krishna, distraught yoginis and ecstatic Sufis are fractured by the confrontational gaze and its silent interrogation.
When she began to exhibit there were two galleries, two collectors and two lines for the happenings in the art world in a couple of newspapers. One was considered lucky if even one person walked into a gallery. Friend would tease her: ‘So, when are you having your next one-person show’, which means one audience a day. So she did her sad and funny ‘Missing Audience’ series in 1981 with empty chairs but the singer singing alone ecstasy, eye closed.

All her paintings in some way or the other have figuratively narrated the story of Indian women-past and present. The rape of Maya Tyagi in 1979 provoked Arpana to paint this widely reported but ill-addressed incident. The widow of the Chasnala mining disaster as victims and figures of social neglect confirmed her identification of subject.

Arpana Caur has been consistently figurative, and she also does printmaking. Her works, mostly oil paintings, are a statement in contrast – her canvases are huge and the subjects and colours minimal. They reflect the serenity that she exudes. Her works are the narratives of peace and tranquility, albeit in brightest of hues. A ‘sufi’ by temperament, as she prefers to be identified, she has made a series on Guru Nanak, Kabir, Buddha, Ghalib, Sohni-Mahiwal, etc. Arpana started showing her works from 1975. Her very first painting was on Amrita Shergil at the age of nine. She loved her name and works. So,
till she got admission in school, her mother asked her to choose a name for herself and she wanted to choose the name Amrita.

Arpana started making some money in the 1980s. She sold her first 8x6 painting in 1975 for Rs.800 in a solo show at Triveni that Husain saab (artist M.F Husain) invited her to do. In 1977, her second solo, but nothing was sold, then Newton Souza’s wife Maria Souza saw her work and asked her to live with her in London and learn art through scholarship. She went there but felt so homesick and shy and came back within a month without completing the course! Instead, she learnt terracotta and metal sculpture and etching in Garhi Studio for 15 years from 1980 to 1995. The execution of a huge work commissioned by the Hiroshima Museum in 1995 to mark the 50th anniversary of the nuclear holocaust is also a major landmark in her career.

She has also been interested in religion and has been pursuing it as a theme, exploring its various aspects in the backdrop of today’s surcharged atmosphere. In fact, the literature and philosophy of Punjab has been a major influence on her work and has contributed to the elements of melancholy, mysticism and devotion that recur in her work. She also worked with Madhubani artist Sat Narain Pande, and both had an exhibition that juxtaposed folk and tribal art.
The recent body of work stems from her battle to survive open heart surgery that she has had to undergo. Engaging with a small format may have come about due to her inability to work with the larger canvases that she is known for, but it has brought in its wake, its own rewards. The responsive surface of paper has yielded a fine draftsmanship while the soft colour washes makes one aware of the tentativeness of the times she is working in. Though her quiet demeanour and soft-spoken nature can prove difficult to assess the great artist, Arpana’s paintings speak a thousand words. She chose to work in a style that was different from her contemporaries who were steeped in abstraction. Caur formulated a figurative approach that was unconventional for the times. Filmed by BBC, Star TV / Doordarshan, Stockholm TV, CNN Hongkong, Canadian TV. Work featured in several books on contemporary Indian art and she is founder Member and Secretary General of Academy of Fine Arts and Literature.

Arpana has also created beautiful murals on Environment. The artist, who had painted five walls in Bangalore at the behest of top cop Jija Hari Singh, was in the city as part of the Art Bengaluru festival.

She had done murals from 1981 to 2005 in India and one in Hamburg, all of them non-commercial, as a commitment to public art. It is hard to extricate the painter from the paintings in the art of Arpana Caur.
She lives her life as one called to profess her faith in Sikhism through her art and through her enormous generosity and selflessness. She has always strongly emphasized humanism. Her humanistic depiction of Sikh massacre earned her much critical acclaim. In her paintings we see a synthesis of Indian miniature paintings and modern art. This synthesis has produced a new language of painting, which is both evocative and eloquent. The metaphysical quality of her paintings adds to the potency of the themes. She has many creations to her credit which are never shown in the paintings by other artists like weaving of water and use of plug as a connection. Now, at the age of 57, Arpana has become a well known and much celebrated artist around the world.

Arpana’s work on female-related themes has over the years been spoken about for placing women in an urban content, where the erotic is downplayed by a practical approach. “In my women-related themes, the subject is not identified by her gender,” explains Arpana, adding that being brought up by a working mother, who was a pillar of strength probably led her to depict women with a more real-life approach, rather than just an object of beauty. Her inspiration and her paintings are a guide for of all us.
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