



Female voice in Nepali ArtJasmine Rajbhandari^{#*}[#]Lecturer (Painting) at Lalitkala Campus, Tribhuvan University.^{*}Corresponding Author: byakhyaa@gmail.com**Citation:** Rajbhandari, J. (2023). The female voice in Nepali Art. *Journal of Fine Arts Campus*, 5(2). 8-17. <https://doi.org/10.3126/jfac.v5i2.67284>

Abstract

The emergence of female voices in Nepali art noticeably began in 1989. The recent practices of female Nepali artists not only represent their personal emotional experiences but also convey strong messages. Their work talks about the various challenges faced by women in the patriarchal society of Nepal, and aims to bring positive changes such as equal space and freedom from social barriers. They not only address gender issues, but also question the right to give birth and abortion. Additionally, they address social disorders such as rape, Chhaupadi practices, untouchable issues during menstruation, and many other political issues in their work. This writing is based on qualitative research design and explores the work of ten Nepali women artists, using the theory of Feminism. Today, Nepali art is rapidly developing due to globalization and education. One of the main reasons for this progress is the rise in consciousness and education of female artists. They have demonstrated unique vision and creativity to lead the entire genre towards a better future. National and international art galleries exhibit their works, and even international museums collect their pieces. Their work is attracting the art market and also is getting critical acclaims.

Keywords: Female voice, Nepali art, feminism, domination, misrepresentation, patriarchy

Introduction

The female voice in Nepali art became prominently visible after 1989 A.D. Some of the notable female artists in Nepal during the 1960s are Urmila Upadhyaya Garg, Sarada Chitrakar, Pramila Giri, Shilu Pyari, Sasikala Tiwari, Bhadra Ghale, Shudha Ratna Khatiwada, Pramila Giri, Shudha Manandhar, Bidhya Shrestha, Sunita Shrestha, Ambika Shrestha, Bhuwaneshwari, Shilsova Shakya, Jwala Shah, Hemendra Kumari Rana and few others. They actively participated in the changes and development of Nepali art through their creative energy (Singh, 1935, p272-80). Bhadra Ghale is mentioned here because she expresses a strong female voice in her charcoal drawing. Today, Nepali art is rapidly developing because of globalization and education. One of the main reasons for the present development is the rise in consciousness and education of female artists. Chitrakar (2020 A.D.) states that the present generation of women artists is not only aware of their rights, but they have proven their dynamic vision in every respect. In addition, to demonstrate individual talents in creativity, they have proven unique vision to lead the whole genre for the better. Collectively. Every other day, we find men along with women artists, going beyond the national borders to showcase present-day artistic strength and represent the country (Infinite thought).

The recent practices of Nepali female artists not only represent their emotional state but the contents are equally strong. Their work talks about the situations they are facing in the patriarchal society of Nepal. Through art, they want to bring positive changes like equal rights in society and freedom from many social barriers. They question not only gender issues like the



feminist movement in Western art, which came into existence during the 1960s and 1970s but also the right to give birth and abortion. They address social injustice and crime like rape, Chhaupadi practices, untouchable issues during menstruation, and many other political concerns. The difference in prize money in sports, and the gender pay gap are examples of it. In the rural parts of Nepal, the sacrifices of women are usual social norms. Girls are often subjected to discriminatory social norms from a very young age, which can be difficult for them to comprehend during their childhood years. They may not understand why their brother is allowed to do things that they are not, and as a result, they grow up within the confines of religious and social norms, with their emotions suppressed. These norms have been passed down from generation to generation for centuries, and the voices of women have often been drowned out and ignored. The walls of a woman's home absorb her voice which is never being heard. To break the cycle of passing on discriminatory social norms from one generation to the next, a genuine voice and strong protest must be undertaken. Nepali art can transform the suffering of women into a powerful voice for protest. Although art is a strong medium for expression, education, and protest, female artists in Nepal only emerged significantly after 1989 A.D. Today, artists like Shashikala Tiwari, Ragini Upadhyaya, Asmina Ranjit, Erina Tamrakar, Pramila Bajracharya, Sarita Dongol, Sangee Shrestha, Sunita Rana, Bidhata K.C., Jasmine Rajbhandari, Sauganga Darshandhari, Shilasha Rajbhandari, Rasana Bajracharya, Pramila Lama, and Riti Maharjan are raising female voices through their artwork. In the upcoming part of the article, some of the artworks by these artists will be briefly interpreted. The concept of feminism in Western art will be clarified before interpreting the paintings. During the 1960s and 1970s, the emergence of the female voice in Western art was influenced by the second wave of feminism. Those who follow its philosophy are called feminists. Rosalind (2018 A.D.) explains:

A feminist is someone who holds that women suffer discrimination because of their sex, that they have specific needs that remain negated and unsatisfied, and that the satisfaction of these needs would require a radical change (some would say a revolution even) in the social, economic and political order...popular approaches to feminism often contain references to a style of dress, to looks, to ways of behaving to men and women, to what used to be called 'manners'. Feminism's wish that women behave differently is also a historical element. Feminism is usually defined as an active desire to change women's position in society(p. 8).

During the 1970s, female artists worked to establish their existence in society. According to Pollock (1988), feminist artists around the globe aimed to re-establish the founding pillars and reception of contemporary art. The 1960s were a time of great turmoil and division, marked by civil rights movements, the Vietnam War, protests, and political assassinations. Cultural attitudes shifted during this period and gender stereotypes in the arts were transformed. Linda Nochlin's essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" is considered a pivotal moment in this shift, as it criticized the social, cultural, and economic circumstances that prevented women from achieving the same status and recognition as their male counterparts (p.20). The feminist movement was against patriarchy and was the first movement to distinguish between sex and gender. Feminists hoped to bring about positive change in the world and gain equal space in society, seeking liberation from social barriers caused by cultural norms. They believed that gender domination was only practiced in cultural programming and that it could be changed through education and social-political activities. Crowther (2000) explains:



Feminist art has subjected the relationship between art, gender, and the gaze to even greater critical scrutiny. Judy Chicago's Dinner Party presents a space laid out for a banquet of great women in history who have been, in significant respects, excluded from a canon of tradition defined by the patriarchal establishment (p.502).

The feminist movement not only raises the voice of women but also practices art forms that society considers to be of lower value. Their paintings, which are often created using watercolors, sewing, weaving, and other crafts traditionally associated with women, are not included in the history of art. However, feminist artists have used these mediums in new conceptual ways. Higonnet disagrees that their works are inferior to masculine works and argues that they are only considered low art because they are not created for sale or exhibition purposes, nor are they made on large canvases. She believes that these works have internal aesthetic excellence (p.183). Numerous female artists such as Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, Suzanne Lacy, Judith Bernstein, Sheila de Bretteville, Mary Beth Edelson, Carolee Schneeman, Rachel Rosenthal, and many others began working in the early 1970s as part of the Feminist art movement in the United States. They aimed to develop feminist writing and art, exploring mediums like performance art, conceptual art, body art, craftivism, video, film, and fiber art. These artists also spoke about the use of the female body in advertising, pregnancy rights, equal pay for equal work, and female abuse in the workplace. This paper focuses on contemporary Nepali female voices in art from a feminist perspective. Although Nepali female artists use different styles, ten paintings are interpreted as samples to support the thesis statement.

Research Methodology

This paper is based on a qualitative research method, focusing on women's voices in Nepali contemporary art. The study emphasizes on Nepali women's thoughts in painting and their connection to women's lives by applying the theory of feminism. Their art contributes to discussions on the issues about women in the society. The research collects secondary data through books and articles. Works of art are the primary sources, and they are analyzed and interpreted in descriptive ways.

Interpretation and Discussion

The women artists of Nepal play a significant role in shaping the contemporary art scene of the country. Despite facing numerous struggles, they have worked tirelessly to establish themselves as important members of the art world. Using their art as a medium of expression, they have created unique and individualistic works. They incorporate religious motifs, natural elements, and nonrepresentational forms to convey their perception of the world. However, only a few Nepali women had the opportunity to receive an education in art until the end of the Rana regime. In Nepal, there are many women artists who work locally in indigenous and traditional art forms such as Mithila and Pauwa, as well as in various art forms used for religious purposes. Some of these artists, like Urmila Upadhyaya Garg, Sarada Chitrakar, Pramila Giri, Shilu Pyari, and Sasikala Tiwari, have had the opportunity to develop their creative knowledge through formal art education. However, only a few artists have used art as a medium for expressing the difficulties faced by women in Nepal. These women artists have focused on gender issues and discrimination through a variety of mediums including painting, sculpture, installation, performance, and other newer forms of art. Their aim is to address the horrific gender-biased issues that exist in Nepal. Many contemporary female artists are addressing various issues such as untouchability during menstruation, women's right to give birth, and sexual assault. They are also raising their voices on political issues in the country. All these efforts are aimed at

ultimately bringing an end to this issues. The most prominent female artist from Nepal who influenced an entire generation of painters with her artwork is Sashikala Tiwari. She learnt European art techniques during her residency and education in Lakhnow. However, when she returned to Nepal, she incorporated many natural elements of the country, such as the Himalayas, flowers, gods, and goddesses, as well as mythological figures like Mira, to express her thoughts in her paintings. According to Sharma (2014), Tiwari's painting titled "Pain" (1987) is interpreted as:

She is exploiting expressionist technique, depicts the sub-human condition of Nepali women, their pain and anxiety, and their determination to carve their own space in society. Her rebellion against social injustice unfolds gradually in the arbitrary visual images. The artist presents the condition of Nepali women in three different stages on the left half of the canvas. At the bottom, two abstract figures without faces and recognizable shapes present the non-existing situation of women and their veils. Their social status is like that of non-living things in a patriarchal society though they are living human beings. They are not free to decide anything for themselves. The patriarchy exploits them as commodities. (Sharma, 2014, pp. 199-200)

The painting "Pain" by the artist features tranquil colors like green and blue, which are applied in several transparent layers of oil. The painting depicts the pain of women, but interestingly, the women figures look like fragments of leaves. In the top left part of the picture space, the Himalayas are beautifully composed, which is a recurring motif in the artist's paintings since she is a great admirer of nature.

In this painting, I am interpreting Panchali (1990 A.D.) (Figure-1) as a feminist representation. It raises questions about the moment in the mythological story of Mahabharata when Dropadi's husbands stood mute and helpless in the royal court while Dusshasan attempted to disrobe her. Dropadi had five powerful husbands, the PachPandavas. In this painting, the female figure on the right side is shown with five heads, symbolizing the absence of her husbands in this critical moment. She was left alone, and her dress is depicted in layers of yellow, blue, green, and white. The tension of the situation is portrayed in circular color strokes of the sky. The soft, rhythmic contour line of the painting makes it look gentle. There are several layers of yellow and green, which bring it closer to nature, while the red of Dropadi's dress contrasts with the green palette. The background features a soft purple tone of the Himalayas. The artist is comparing this tragic event to the recent social abuses of females, which are often not addressed, and the people around us remain silent. The artist is silently protesting against this situation and raising her voice through this painting.

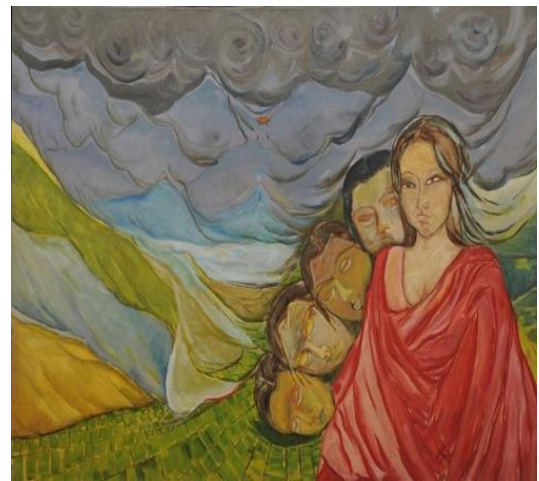


Figure-1, Sashikala, Panchali, 1990, Oil on canvas

Ragini is another famous contemporary artist who has mastered the perspective of women in her work. Olson (2020) interprets her work by using a harmonious colour palette her works revolve around religious tolerance and women's space in Nepali society and depict the need for peace, love, and compassion. Her work is deeply emotional, shown by her use of bold

and aggressive lines and colors, and speaks to the human degradation of the natural world through pollution and technology.

In many of her works, I choose her piece "Justice for Mother Earth" (2014) (Figure-2). It expresses the harm that humans have caused to earth. The tortoise in the painting represents the patience of mother earth in the face of violence created by war, while the four elephants represent the different powers that bring about war on earth. The painting features a reclining figure of a woman with the sign of the goddess Kumari on her forehead, which represents mother earth. The weighing scale in her hand symbolizes justice being demanded for the devastation caused by human civilization. In the background, many rocket and missile symbols represent war, set against a flat yellow ochre background. The artist explores a range of themes in her work, including consumer culture, desire, religion, security issues, nationalism, environmental degradation, and human rights. Through her paintings, prints, and mixed media, she addresses a variety of socio-political issues. Dasgupta (2014) states:



Figure-2, Ragini, Justice for Mother Earth, 2014, Oil on canvas

Nepal's art world is dominated by men. Hindu and Buddhist religious paintings, for example, such as the Newar *Paubha* and the Tibetan *thangka* are traditionally made by men. Western-influenced academic and modernist traditions, as well as contemporary art, have been so dominated by a male vision that the emergence of distinct female voices in art. Such as that of Ragini Upadhaya Grela introduced a new worldview and visual language. Art historians have summarized the phenomenon "as the profession of painting was traditionally a man's world, contemporary art produced by Nepali women speaks forcefully of a shift towards a perception of a world often centering around their gendered identities: of self, body politics, gender, and sexuality.

Dasgupta agrees that Ragini's paintings lend voice to different areas of society. In many of her works, female figures are depicted as the main protagonists to convey her ideas.

Asmina Ranjit is an art activist who focuses on women-centric themes in her works. She sheds light on the injustices and horrors that women in Nepal face. Ranjit experiments with various art styles, including painting, installation, performance, and new media art. She says, "Being born with a womb inherently makes my experience different. Physically, I feel different. In Nepal, I live in a world of patriarchy, where being born a woman means being treated differently. This influences what I create." (Ranjit, *Feminine Force*, 2002).

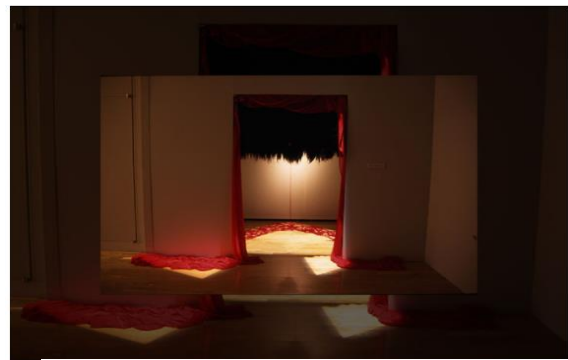


Figure-3, Asmina, Feminine force, 2002, Installation.

I consider Ranjit's installation, *Feminine Force* (Figure-3), to be a significant voice in Nepali

society. It was installed in 2002 at the NAFA gallery. In her artwork, she uses red cloths to represent the flow of blood during menstruation. The entire room is depicted as the uterus of a woman, and the door symbolizes the vagina with long hair hanging on it. The artist portrays menstruation as a natural phenomenon and emphasizes that the feminine power and untouchability during this period should be removed from Nepalese society. She believes that instead of ostracizing it, menstruation should be celebrated. The dark room creates suspense for the viewer, and the use of light suggests hope. She encourages women in Nepal to celebrate menstruation instead of feeling ashamed.



Figure-4, Erina, 2014, Acrylic on canvas



Figure-5, Erina, 2008, Umbrella Series

arranged in an irregular pattern. A large umbrella positioned at the center, with two hands hidden behind it, represents motherhood. The mother protects her child from every difficulty, just like an umbrella saves us from the rain. The blue hue with white color evokes spiritual feelings, and the texture of water droplets enhances this effect. According to Bangdel (2014 A.D.), the artwork symbolizes protection from the rain and unity to fight against it. Erina created this series to showcase her excitement about being a mother. She has also received appreciation for her latest series called

'Power Women'. In this series, women have large eyes and a third eye as well, which symbolizes a state of enlightenment or the evocation of mental images with deeply personal or spiritual significance. The third eye is associated with visions, clairvoyance, precognition, and out-of-body experiences. Bangdel agrees that she uses the umbrella as a symbolic representation of

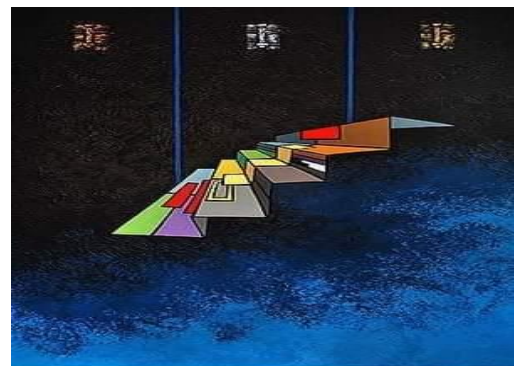


Figure-6, Sangee, 2009, Acrylic on canvas

protection by women to her family and the third eye as a superpower of thought and vision of women. Therefore, her artworks is her voice and thoughts about womanhood.

Sangee Shrestha explores her creative concept in geometrical form (Figure-6). She converts human figures into geometrical forms similar to the Dutch abstractionist Piet Mondrian. One of Sangee's paintings from the Abhibyakta Abhibyakti series (2009 A.D.) depicts a ladder hanging on a string in geometrical shapes. The artist intends to convey that women are similar to ladders, dedicating their lives to the development of their family members' careers while forgetting their own. Here, she shows the happy face of the female, indicating satisfaction with the sacrifices she made. Her composition appears to be distinct and visually appealing. Glan (2009 A.D.) interprets:

Her arts reflect the emotional challenges of humans and the rejection of boundaries imposed upon them by society through geometrical shapes and sizes juxtaposing with each other. The basic geometric lines have portrayed the faces of women and recited the overall story that women have explored over years and years. Her color has unmasked women's masquerades to take out the truth from getting subdued through the use of squares and rectangles. (Sangee's unique art style)

Glan also supports and raises her voice against a society where women have to sacrifice their professional careers for the development of the family members' professions. Their ambitions and dreams are often considered less important.

Jasmine Rajbhandari is another artist who paints many social issues in her paintings. Her Surrealistic work *My body my right* (2021A.D.) (Figure-7) opposes the thought that rape is happening due to the dresses worn by girls. Now a days many rape cases and sexual harassment are happening in the society. Some unaware people are pointing out as the reason of this happening is the



Figure-7, Jasmine, 2021, *My body my right*, Acrylic



Figure-8, Saurganga, *Think about me*, Etching
print on paper

short dresses women are wearing. However, the artist disagrees with this idea. She feels that women are gradually overcoming the social barriers and exploring their world outside the home. They are becoming well educated, and working in higher positions. Here, the bottle is the symbolic representation of the world now and women are trying to come out towards the new sky of development. However, like the kites that are cut from the threads, their innocent dreams are killed due to the poor mental and emotional status enforced upon them due to horrific incidents such as rape and sexual harassment. Here, a schoolgirl with a bag in her back is riding a bicycle and the dragonflies are flying in the sky. The artist through this

painting states that our dresses are not responsible for sexual abuse. Moreover, the artist is creating gaps and blanks in her art by not saying anything directly but by using her symbols. In order to show motion, the female figure is distorted and bent unnaturally in her work.

Sauganga Darshandhari is a female printmaker who also raises voices for women in her works. She created a print entitled 'Think about me' in etching aquatint in 2017 A.D (Figure-8). She shares the idea that the *Chhaupadi* practices should be removed from Nepal. Even when we are using new technologies today, the *Chhaupadi* is still practiced in Nepal. She fills the whole composition with a huge sanitary pad and in the middle of it she draws a map of Surkhet. Surkhet is the district of Nepal where *Chhaupadi* is still practiced. Joshi (2022 A.D.) found out that *Chhaupadi* is a cultural practice where women are considered untouchable and forced to stay in separate huts during menstruation and childbirth. Despite *chhaupadi*'s criminalization by the government, 70%–80% of women in western Nepal are forced to practice it. The practice is rooted in religious norms that consider menstruating women impure. Communities enforce *Chhaupadi* by creating an environment of fear, telling women that if they do not follow the restrictions, bad things will happen to their families (p121). Hence, the artist disapproves of the idea of *Chhaupadi* in her work. She fills the background with various small motifs of modern icons, which balance the big pad. It creates rhythm and looks like a design in her work. This motif symbolizes the modern society where these types of old taboos are still being practiced. She is expressing the truth and appeals the society to think about this serious issue.



Figure-9, Riti, *Sit le bagayeko nyaya*, 2018, Acrylic on canvas

Another young artist in my research is Riti Maharjan who raises questions about the rape of young girls happening in today's society. Her work *Sit le bagayeko nyaya* (Figure-9) is created in 2018 A.D. She tries to depict the injustice happening in our society. The artist states that in recent times we have seen women of different age groups, even the very young ones, are being raped. And in order to hide the crime, some of them are mercilessly murdered. Maharjan (2018 A.D.) states that in her paintings, the two Eagles represent the wicked eyed criminal flying freely



Figure-10, Pramila Lama, 2018, performance

even after the crime, and the helpless girl is a victim, crying in deep pain, appealing for life and



justice. Here, with the wide opened mouth, she depicts the voice of victim, crying to the parents and the thousands of people for justice and security in the country. A daughter is a little Princess to her parents. The love and dreams with which a daughter is raised have been smashed that is shown by the broken pieces of the tiara. The girl's sweetness of life, dreams, and wishes have all been destroyed akin to the melted ice cream on the floor. Hence, this painting calls out for justice (Infinite Thought, p.41). Through this work, she successfully evokes the pain of our society.

Lastly, Pramila Lama is a hardworking female artist who expresses her thoughts directly and straight forward. In her performance, *invisibility of Menstruation* (Figure-10) performed in the Tarragon Museum in 2018 A.D., she wants to break all the barriers to untouchability during the menstruation period of women. She uses red color powder, rope, thread, and the environment itself as her medium for performance. She used thread as a cultural barrier and wanted to break all these forbidden norms from touching other people and objects during menstruation. Shakya (2018 A.D.) states:

She opposes and expresses that nothing in our society with the exception of violence and fear has been more effective in keeping women in their place, than the degradation of the menstrual cycle. This is the 21st century. Women are constantly proving that they are in no way inferior to men. They are working hard to find their place in a world that has been dominated by males for so long. Yet every month their voices are shunned and their opinions silenced. Every month they are forced to put their life on hold, step back, and become invisible. Every month they are compelled to believe that they're impure. Every month they are punished, simply because they are women.

Through this vibrant red and black performance, she wants this forced practice of untouchability during menstruation to vanish from our society. She expresses that women are not inferior to male.

Conclusion

Women in Nepal have found a powerful voice in art. Through their work, they are able to draw attention to the social injustices they face, particularly regarding sexual assault. From early pioneers like Sashikala Tiwari to the new generation of female artists, women are actively exploring new forms and styles in Nepali art. They work alongside their male counterparts to develop the country's art scene. Women in Nepal believe that both genders should be taught appropriate norms and behaviors, and they express these beliefs through personal symbols and colors, creating a new vision in art. Their work is not limited to feminine emotions; they also offer opinions on politics, natural degradation, social development, corruption, and more. National and international art galleries exhibit their work, and international museums collect their pieces. Their work is both critically acclaimed and commercially successful.

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