

# Telling Stories about Transformed Identity of Mithila Women through Paintings

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## ABSTRACT

*This research paper explores how Maithili women project their identity by telling their stories in Mithila Paintings. They portray their role as women telling traditional to extraordinary stories through painting in the Maithil community. On the one hand, they have to play social roles as the daughter (in-laws) and mother (in-laws). They remain confined to serve the overall purposes of the patriarchal ruling system following a conventional set of behaviors in the family and society. On the other hand, they hold tremendous skills in telling stories by executing Mithila paintings. Their art and skills have finally helped them carve out their identity as independent, bold, and courageous women leading the whole Mithila community by telling their stories in Mithila paintings. They present their long experience of struggle to fight against their marginal position in the Maithil community. During the research on Mithila women's paintings, the researcher has collected data based on secondary resources such as artworks, articles, books, and dissertations available in online or printed form; visited libraries; and consulted with experts in the field. The visual storytelling method is used and feminist theory is applied to analyze the data and support her claim.*

**Keywords:** Identity, Mithila painting, Maithil women, patriarchy, storytelling

## 1. Introduction

This research paper reviews the identity of Mithila women who project their identity by telling their stories through the medium of traditional paintings which are known as Mithila paintings. Caught into patriarchal and conservative Hindu so-

cial and cultural practices, they occupy the marginal space at home and in society both economically as well as socio-politically. But through the medium of Mithila paintings, they present themselves as confident, talented, and busy creating arts and crafts. This state of being is the main force behind the formation of the identity of the women in the Mithila region. The identity they portrayed through Mithila Painting depicts their stories of changing roles in society. Their reformed identity reflects that they are involved in exercising power, being independent, and respecting their value as Maithil women. Their painting exposes their identity and their community where they tell their stories depicting different roles.

The traditional Mithila society tries to confine Mithila women to be loyal to their concerned society without crossing the limited roles inside the home and society. However, they tell their story of traditional roles and responsibilities portrayed through Mithila painting, and at the same time, they confirm their leading role with the help of painting. As painting is for exhibition, it makes their private and familial stories universal.

With paintings, the Mithila women come out of the marginalized position and take the dominant role by telling stories of physical, spiritual, cultural, and economic boundaries. While doing so, they portray their intellectual skills as well. No doubt, with ages-old traditional roles on their shoulders, they seemed to have developed optimum tolerance and discovered their feminine strength, courage, confidence, and togetherness through painting. Along with this, they explore their subjective identity not only in Mithila society but also in the national and international sectors through their performance.

As women in the Maithil community experienced a long history of domination, the untold stories of women's suppression, victimization, and marginalization further added to their submission for a longer period. The root cause of the problem lies in untold stories. The long history of domination remained for a long time and the women in that society never dared to tell their stories which were limited to themselves but those did not become public. However, the women in that community attempted to reflect their submissive history in paintings. As they began telling their stories of domination, they became more aware of their situation by taking bold steps. The same thing became visible to the local and international community through paintings. It helps Mithila women in transforming their identity from traditional to extraordinary.

Different researchers have studied the Mithila paintings from different perspectives. Different research works on Mithila painting in different issues such as cultural performance, indigenous culture, social semiotics and psychological empowerment of women have been found.

Yadav (2014) has studied Mithila painting based on the cultural performance of gender power. The researcher has highlighted the cultural significance of Mithila art

or painting which is connected with day to day life of Maithil people along with their social life in association with the marriage ceremony, celebrating the festival, and religious performances.

Mandal (2018) has studied Mithila painting concentrating on indigenous arts and culture. He points out the cultural significance of Mithila folk arts through visual representation. He highlights the value of Mithila folk arts and its importance in the global community. Additionally, these folk arts have distinct indigenous characteristics in Maithil society.

Singh & Kirtipur (2020) have conducted their research on Mithila painting using semiotic theory. They analyzed the roles of language in the process of communication to derive meaning and its interpretation.

Kumari (2020) emphasized on psychological empowerment of women in Mithila painting. It concerns building the self-confidence, safety, freedom, and courage of women. It aims to improve the situation of women in the Mithila community.

To my knowledge, I have not found that anyone has analyzed the identity formation of Mithila women by telling stories in Mithila paintings. So, this research attempts to fulfill the gap between the research that has already been conducted on different areas and the topic that remains to be explored regarding Mithila painting. The researcher examines how Mithila women form their unique identities by telling their stories in their paintings.

## **Materials and Methods**

The researcher has selected the visual storytelling method to analyze the situation of Maithili women. While analyzing their paintings, the researcher has found various stories of women told in different situations. She focuses her study on the identity formation of Mithil women who have included their deep-rooted experiences in their paintings. The researcher uses visual techniques to analyze their stories in paintings and she finds a unique identity in the paintings.

The research work is qualitative in nature. The area of research is the painting of Mithila women that centers on their experiences. The concept of this research paper is based on the term paper prepared for the M.Phil. course entitled “Visual Social Semiotics of Art: A Case of Mithila Painting”. The researcher has further developed the paper by collecting data from different resources by visiting the library, consulting with university Professors of the related field, and analyzing and selecting available Mithila paintings in online resources that portray women’s stories relating to the Mithila community. The collected data are critically analyzed and interpreted based on the theoretical insights developed by feminist theorists highlighting visual narratives to support the claim of the researcher. She has taken support from different research works such as scholarly articles, books, dissertations, etc. as the reference for her research.

## Results and Discussion

Throughout the research, the researcher has derived the findings that Mithila women's role as the traditional and submissive has been transformed into extraordinary women. In other words, they have been successful in transforming their role into the courageous, intelligent, and successful leaders of Mithila society. It becomes possible by following the storytelling method. The long experience of their submissive practices is no longer limited to them; they make it visible and audible to all by telling their stories in Mithila paintings.

While conducting this research, the visual narrative effectively presents the situation of women throughout the Mithila paintings. The painting is a means of visual narrative. The painting does carry the message based on the context. The experts of visual narrative claim that "some form of paint has been used to depict story" (Pimenta & Poovaiah, 2010, p. 27). Visual storytelling is an effective way to convey the message including the feelings. "Storytelling pictures touch us on elementary, visceral level, and it is beyond any literary content. One does not necessarily need to comprehend every small detail of a depicted episode to establish emotional connections and learn about feelings" (Horvath, 2019, p. 65). In the storytelling method, the situation is visualized in the mind of readers and they understand the contexts more effectively. It is a more convincing way of transmitting the message.

The Maithil women identify themselves as famous painters, powerful storytellers in painting, and independent performers of their society representing their stories in the paintings. The talented and skillful projection of the reality of the Maithil women and the society in their paintings leads to play an active and leading role in the global community. Though it is the most challenging task for them to identify themselves positively, they portray their leading role uncovering their submissive situation and highlighting their never-ending endeavor in paintings that have several stories of Mithil women.

The performance of Mithila women is based on cultural, traditional, religious, economic, and social practices. The major source of their representation is the depiction of their-deep rooted stories in Mithila paintings associating with long history, and traditional practices in the community along with raising the voice for their independence. As the same woman or girl who has experienced and been familiar with the traditional sets of rules or behaviors, she has been able to create her identity as the leading and confident person without any fear and restriction in her mind. At the same time, the researcher takes reference from "The Janakpur Development Center: Reaching form change". It comprises:

Manjula appeared in her village home five years ago when first asked about her wall paintings. She not only veiled herself, but retreated into her house, speaking through a window in an almost inaudible whisper.

Now ... she has appeared several times on TV, and has given speeches before foreign dignitaries and government officials, including the Prime Minister of Nepal.

The Janakpur Development Center records the situation of traditional Maithil women who hardly leave their household or village and live in veils by serving husbands or other members of the family. The way this condition is sketched in the painting that has uncovered their veils and changed their situation as a free person. It helps them to contribute not only to society, but also to the nation conveying the message to the world community about their intelligence with strong voice and skills. Manjula as the representative female character of the Mithila community has been able to transform herself as confident. In the similar way, Mithila women show their talent after joining the Janakpur Women's Development Center by exposing themselves or their situation in paintings.

Mithila women demonstrate their distinct identities with tribal art and culture as their regional identity as Pika Ghosh in "Unrolling a Narrative Scroll: Artistic Practice and Identity in Late-Nineteenth-Century Bengal" claims, "[t]he transformed image imparts authority and legitimacy to these artists during a momentous transition in the region's history" (p. 837) in the mountainous country of the eastern Himalaya. This region known as Janakpur is full of Hindu ritual expressions which are performed through figures and prayers during festivals. Worshipping different deities and achieving the desired result resemble gaining power. Pradyumna P. Karan and Cotton Mather in "Art and Geography: Patterns in the Himalaya" point out:

In Mithila, the ancient cultural region located in the Terai of eastern Nepal and centered upon Janakpur, there is a distinct artistic tradition represented by paintings done on mud walls by village women. Favorite subjects are gods and decorative floral and ornamental patterns on the walls of a corridor or of the Gosain-Ghar (room) where the family deity is worshipped. (p. 497)

The reflections of Mithila women and their cultural roles or community practices expose their identity of a particular region with distinct perceptions. The regional tradition of wall paintings by women in the Mithila community is analyzed and perceived broadly once those paintings are exhibited. The general identity of the Mithila region, Janakpur, the birthplace of the goddess Sita, projects different gods and goddesses in the painting. While doing so, they compare themselves with godly positions. The Maithili women reflect their position in painting in the place of gods and goddesses and they consider their activities as the genius performance. The given picture visualizes the changing role of women in Mithila:





*Figure. 1* "Marriage Icons" by Pinki Kumari

The painting by Pinki Kumari visualizes the leading role of a woman agency that is bigger in size. Pinki Kumari projects center stage for the bride by erasing other traditional symbols palanquin and lotus as submissive roles of women for fertility and producing children. Instead, copulating with birds, snakes, and fishes means sexual fun for newly married couples. It threatens the traditional concept of marriage. Likewise, the godly image of the top-left center denotes the couple's marital life as pleasant as god's. The woman agency is free to secure her sexual bliss which is a challenging idea for a traditional kohbar painting and the submissive life of women at the time.

Through Mithila painting, women portray their choices and voices freely for their happiness, satisfaction, and liberation. Rani Jha depicts the collaborative work of women to subvert the traditional norms and values which marginalize women for centuries. This is also a radical shift in the patriarchal Mithila society. The attempt of Maithil women's togetherness to break restrictions on women is portrayed in the painting:



*Figure. 2* "Together Tearing the Veil" by Rani Jha

The painting by Rani Jha highlights eyes on a wider veil that symbolizes women are in shadows and they struggle against centuries of purdah, where the traditional pa-

triarchal society confines women inside the home limiting them to household chores. A group of women at the center of the painting represents their common experience and the major focus of the eyes of women indicates that they are attempting to explore external roles by using their capabilities. In other words, Jha captures the condition of marginalized women and reflects their joint efforts to break that tradition. This togetherness is the strength of women as Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress in *Social Semiotics* state “the relations of power and solidarity which constitute every social formation” (p. 52) that emphasizes the harmony and supremacy of all the women with their education, and innovative practices. It helps them to fight against the superstitious and restricted purdah system, or for getting proper opportunity and their identity. Moreover, many eyes shown in the picture are peeping through the curtain and four women at the center are tearing the restricted and black curtain to see the light of the external world breaking the male-dominated systems for enjoying women’s rights and liberty.

Mithila women have struggled a lot to uplift their condition as human beings. From the condition of an object or the property of male members in the family, women hold the categories as others who lack self-identity and dignity in Mithila society. At the same point, Loriliai Biernacki in the text *Renowned Goddess of Desire: Women, Sex, and Speech in Tantra* comments that “[t]he wife is typically and normatively constructed as male property. This wife is normatively expected to assimilate her identity to that of her husband, in effect, to erase her difference, which constitutes her identity by becoming an object, that is, male property” (p. 106). It shows the subordinating condition of Mithila women from the past. They remain mute under the patriarchal society serving their male counterpart. By being a mere object, they always have thought and acted for the happiness and comfort of their husband. Their role as a tool for serving their husband or other male members becomes clear even from the painting by Rani Jha:



**Figure. 3** “Abortion Clinic” by Rani Jha

The painting of the abortion clinic depicts that the female fetuses are thrown away before they are born. The real picture of the Mithila community is executed in the painting. It highlights the whole life picture of women in that society. Rani Jha envisions the condition of young wives who are strained to abort their female babies forcefully by their in-laws. The preference of male children in Mithila society contextualizes the dominance of male power and its control. The painting of the abortion clinic is a commentary on the social evils that are practiced upon women of that community.

Unlike the role of subservient, Maithil women depict themselves as powerful beings and challenge the male-dominated society by transforming themselves into leading positions. It denotes the transformation of women and their roles through paintings by Rani Jha:



**Figure. 4** “Changing Women” by Rani Jha

The painting “Changing Women” by Rani Jha indicates the generation gap of women moving from the right. The very first is the veiled face surrounded by eight children, and wearing lots of jewelry. The second woman is not covering face but her hair is heavily ornamented, and she bore four children. The next panel exposes a woman with a sari over her shoulder and hair in a bun having fewer children. The woman in the last panel is wearing a sleeveless uncovering her face and hair carrying a mobile on her hand and wearing a wristwatch in place of many bangles having only one girl child. At this point, the women in the Mithila community are giving priority to the female child instead of gender selectivity.

While depicting the transformative role of women in Mithila paintings, the researcher finds the tantric influence within their paintings. It enforces inner awareness of actions relating to human desires, feelings, and situations evolutionarily. It creates a dichotomy between the inner world and the outer world. As David R. Kinsley in *Tantric Visions of the Divine Female* views concerning Kali’s tantric power which is



ultimately related to women's strength:

Kali is free from convention, wild and uncontrolled in nature, and not bound to or limited by a male consort... Considering Kali's identification with the cremation ground and death, her loose hair may suggest the end of the world. Her hair has come apart and flies about every which way; order has come to an end; all has returned to chaos. (p. 84)

The destructive power of Kali is best understood as a powerful weapon to fight against evil forces. Kali is the supreme goddess to get victory over the antagonistic forces. In a similar manner, Mithila women intend to be Kali and perform to get the victory like Kali following tantric knowledge. Likewise, people in the community believe that the social and cosmic order ends in Kali's wild, unbound, flowing hair, and her overall identification threatens the unhealthy practices and injustice in the community. In a symbolic way, women in the Mithila community reflect tantric knowledge/way of performing superior roles like Kali for confronting the traditional or submissive role. As women's bound hair indicates conformity to social convention or being under the control of social norms or values, they are gradually determined to be bold and free from social boundaries by acknowledging the path of Kali. Kali drinks the blood of demons who threaten the world and plays a destructive and constructive role. In other words, Kali plays the double role by fighting against evils, and creating joy by achieving the desired goals. Similarly, Ajit Mookerjee and Madhu Khanna in *The Tantric Way* represent, "Tantra's aim is to realize this integrated wholeness of polarities through active contemplation: achieving this integration of polarity means becoming Shiva-Shakti, united as one" (p. 16). It affirms sexual union when male and female both have the experience of unity and ecstatic joy. Kali herself is not excluded from that sexual energy and indulges with Shiva with the rediscovery of the mystery of her womanly quality. In this context, Loriliai Biernacki further illustrates the picture of women in the form of Kali focusing on "the woman is at the center of the rite ... the living woman is the goddess, not considered separate from the goddess" (p. 42). Like goddesses, Mithila women equate their position as goddesses to exercise power, strength, feelings, and emotion. They arrange this situation visually in their paintings.

Mithila women include their radical position in Mithila society through religious activities. They are the creator of Maithil art and culture by taking reference from Hindu religious sculptures. The marriage of Ram and Sita is drawn in the Kingdom of King Janak in the past and that visualized in Janaki Temple. The painting of Sita and Ram Vivaha (marriage) is prioritized in ritual performance as well as religious importance. It includes the narrative of rituals in their paintings. As Jay L. Lemke in *Talking Science: Language, Learning, and Values* evokes the "[n]arrative representations relate participants in terms of 'doing' and 'happening,' of the unfolding of actions, events, or processes of change" (p. 141). Maithil women exhibit religious stories in their paintings.

In association with this, they present themselves as major figures to perform religious activities regarding themselves in the position of gods. At this point, Coralynn Davis in his article ““Listen, Rama’s Wife!”: Maithil Women’s Perspectives and Practices in the Festival of Sama Cakeva” states that “ritual and festival activity is absolutely central to Maithili women’s selfhood” (p. 30). Maithili women and girls make their female-centered commentaries on themselves to describe their subjectivity while performing in the festival. They construct paintings addressing the modern time and context with their creative identity as the painters being well-known about major religious roles instead of being mere viewers. In this sense, Mithila women are creators of innovative art namely Mithila painting, and at the same time, they are rulers who rule their community the way they like. Similarly, they are narrators who have told the real stories of their choice.

Telling the story of Mithila women themselves in the Mithila society is a challenging job that is against the traditional patriarchal system. In addition to this, they become independent by themselves. For being economically strong, they make their painting the major source of income. Santosh Kumar Singh in his Ph. D. dissertation entitled *Mithila Art: A Socio-Semiotic Study* inserts ideas from Sonam Dhingra’s blog “Mithila Art and Women Entrepreneurs” about the economic condition of Maithil women:

In the present age of globalization where each and every economy of the world is giving emphasis on women empowerment which is not possible by creating employment opportunities for them but to motivate them to go for creating their own enterprise. Women have undergone a radical transformation from merely a homemaker to dynamic multifaceted personality contributing to the socio-economic growth worldwide. Therefore, a move from family management to enterprise management may be easier than a move from paid employment to self-employment. (pp. 37-38)

Singh simplifies Dhingra’s idea concerning with economic independence of Mithila women through their self-run industry. The way women in this globalized world hold major economic responsibilities, Maithil women also have their source of income and, hence, they are major decision-makers in the family and the community for what Coralynn Davis in “Feminist Tigers and Patriarchal Lions: Rhetorical Strategies and Instrument Effects in the Struggle for Definition and Control over Development in Nepal” asserts as “reconsolidated positions of economic, political, and cultural dominance” (p. 206). Likewise, Mithila women have access to national and international business transactions. They become independent and confident by selling their paintings which expose their intellectual, cultural, and religious significance. This is also recognized as women’s contribution traditionally, ideologically, and spiritually. In this way, Mithila women identify and recognize themselves as extraordinary women presenting

their stories in paintings.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Maithili women reflect their stories in their paintings. Telling stories through art is a kind of bold step from their passive situation where the women remained silent for a long period only by following patriarchal norms and values. The different stories of Mithila women related to familial, social, physical, cultural, spiritual, and economic activities were unheard from generation to generation. However, they began to share their submissive stories in their painting. Once, their stories are visible in paintings, it motivates them to take further bold steps in terms of their roles and responsibilities. Telling stories in Mithila paintings by Maithil women as a powerful tool that threatens their limited conventional roles as producing babies, serving patriarchy, being under the veil, and being confined within the periphery of the house. The visualization of the real-life situation of women in paintings has well covered their multiple spectrums of common stories highlighting their intelligence, power, and liberation with self-determination to portray extraordinary identity in the community. As a result, they are not only forming their identity in the Maithila community but raising the strong voice and unique identity of women in the global community.

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