

The Beauty and the Beast: Triumph of the Feminine in the Paintings of Gogi Saroj Pal

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ABSTRACT

Animals and women have often been linked together by the artists to bring a different dimension in their creation. The linking of animal and woman was a long-running tradition of Indian paintings, which was particularly used to embody patriarchal dominancy and gender biases. After Independence, a substantial number of female artists had started to explore the lost identity of women in their paintings and reconfigured the female body to depict important subjects. Female artists had opted to resist the politicized imagery of women and made their own identity by subjugating the male-dominancy through paintings. They also modified the way of representation and other supportive elements of painting like space, color application, gestures, flora, and fauna, etc. where animal imagery is being opted differently. Gogi Saroj Pal is one of those feminist artists who opposed the predominant concept of male dominancy. She is also the first and the foremost feminist artist of India after Amrita Sher-Gill, whose works are mostly female-centric. Pal's work is mainly based on woman and animal depiction and she invented most of her female protagonists after getting influenced by animals that play a significant role to generate a feministic approach in Pal's paintings. This paper will aim to discuss the significance of animals in some of the paintings of Gogi Saroj Pal in which two of her series named Hat-Yogini Shakti and Kamdhenu will be analysed through the critical approach. The appraisal will be framed based on a personal interview of Gogi Saroj Pal, taken by the author and on other critical theories.

Keywords: Female Resistance, Gender Politics, Objectification, Subjective Approach, Socio-cultural Aspect in Art

INTRODUCTION

Animals have been frequently depicted in Indian art for their auspiciousness and aesthetical values. Their existence in art is as significant as human beings therefore they were depicted from the very pre-historic period on the walls in huge sizes (Mathpal, 1984, Kamat 1997). The earliest civilizations also have the same influence and the animals were projected in the art and artifacts in various forms (Brooks & Wakankar, 1976, Nagar, 1998). Symbolism has also been taken as a criterion in that civilization to merge human beings with animals (Mcintosh, 2008).

Then this tradition of animal depiction has been frequently followed until contemporary times. The work of contemporary artists is playing with the imagery of animals and constructing their conceptual forms through modern experimentation. In earlier times, the animals were particularly adopted to promote religion and traditional customs and to display power. Gradually, the animals have been adopted as a representative of sexuality in the depiction of art on a large scale.

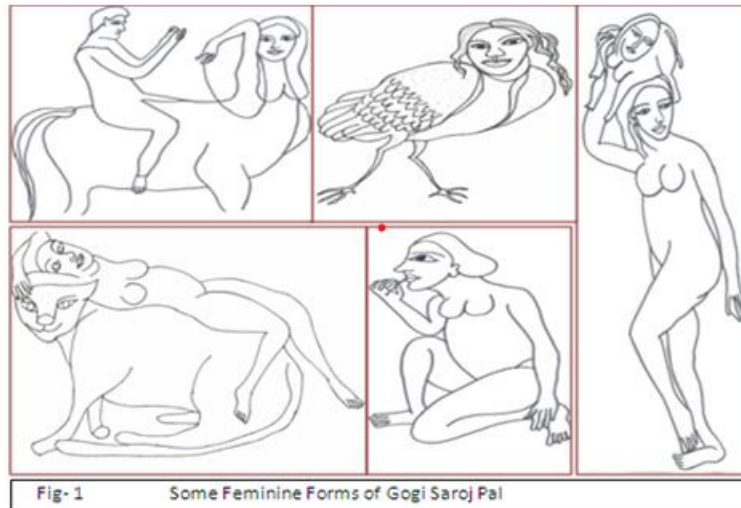


Fig.1 Drawing of some painted figures form the painting of Gogi Saroj Pal

In this way, a woman has been objectified through the symbolic depiction of animals and birds to evoke sensual pleasure or to represent male supremacy. Contrary to it, male sexuality has been executed through horse, bull, etc. to overpower the female sexuality. Visual communication has been done through the placement of animal and their signs, for instance, the depiction of Lajja Guri, an ancient Goddesses is symbolized with spiders in the Indus Valley (Kramrisch, 1956, Sankalia, 1960, Tiwari, 1985, Muesse, 2011, Martin, 2012) In these forms, the woman had been painted with deer, peacock, swan, and other animals either embracing or sitting with them, waiting for her lover, engaged in love-making, erotic display and so on (Archer 1956, Randhawa 1959, Welch 1961, Levine 1971, Okada 1992, Aitken 1997). In modern Indian paintings, some female artists changed this way of representing women along with another aspect of the association including animals. They entirely changed the portrayal of females and developed some contributive forms with feministic advancement.

Woman with an animal is mostly portrayed for objectification by numerous male artists in contemporary Indian art in abstract and semi-abstract forms. This prevalent imagery of Women with the animal has been subverted by Gogi Saroj Pal, a feminist artist of India. Gogi Saroj Pal, an eminent artist of India, has made various paintings, based on animal forms some of which have become a major source of her artistic inspiration and she has painted several themed series on them like Kinnari, Hat-Yogini Shakti, Kamdhenu and Dancing Hoarse, etc. In this series, the artist has made a hybrid creature, which is half animal and half woman. This paper will aim to discuss the subjugation of animal imagery in some of the paintings of Gogi Saroj Pal from her Hat-Yogini and Kamdhenu series.

Hat-yogini: Taming the Forbidden Force Gogi Saroj Pal has invented a remarkable protagonist expression in her series titled "*Hat-Yogini Shakti*" in vibrant colours. Hat-Yogini Shakti is about a woman engaged in Yoga with energy and force. Gogi Saroj Pal made a series on this term in various postures. It can be considered that she has taken the concept of Kali after taking inspiration from mythology (Kumar, 2008). These series have been carried out by Pal with a female figure, which is mostly depicted as sitting or standing on a tiger. The word '*Hat*' stands for a state of being forceful and '*Yogini*' stands for the practitioner of Yoga or rituals. Yoga is usually performed to gain physical and mental satisfaction and prowess with self-realization from a very long time in Vedic culture. According to Burley, Yoga is 'the realization of one's true identity as the self' (Burley, 2000, p.1). '*Shakti*' word is commonly used for the Goddess Kali, the Black Goddess and also known as Devi or Durga along with other various names in Hindu mythology.

The chronological pieces of evidence of Devi have been found in much historical text of Hindu mythology (Khanna, 2007). The Goddess or Devi is described as the rescuer of all Gods from the devils in Devi-Mahatmaya (a literary account, around 400-500 CE) in the form of '*Shakti*' (Coburn, 1991). Shakti or Devi has taken birth from the combined divine power of many gods and considered as a rescuer of good from the evil forces (Milford-Lutzker, 2002). The Hat-Yogini Shakti is full of feminine forces, which described to be a female version of Lord Shiva and in general. Shakti is also known as the wife of Lord Shiva according to Hindu mythology.

Here, two kinds of approaches can be observed in the depiction of Hat-Yogini. The first one is the reincarnation of a woman from the world-known imagery of Hat-Yogini (name of Goddess Kali and used for that woman who performed tough practices to gain wisdom and supernatural powers). In another, the long prevalent Goddess imagery, associated with beauty and sensuousness has been questioned after setting new paradigms of appearance by Gogi Saroj Pal. In the series of paintings of Hat-Yogini, a huge tiger, tamed by Goddess Kali, is depicted by the artist. In this way, it appears that Pal has chosen the character of Goddess Shakti and then represented it in a much-subdued tone, which is a deviation from the traditional trend of depicting Goddesses with beauty and sensuousness. The Goddess used to be portrayed as a beautiful and charming woman. This phenomenon of beauty and aesthetical approach has emerged appropriately through the calendar art of Ravi Varma in which a well-proportionate Goddess was made with delicacy (Uberoi 1990 and Thakurta 1991).

Goddess Kali had been created by the Gods to get rid of all the evil, her sinister attribute cannot be controlled even by herself. She is associated with destructive powers and mostly painted with the horrifying gesture, where beauty is particularly avoided by the artist. In the most popular image of Kali, Lord Shiva is made as laying under her foot to stop her rage. Her blue naked body is decorated with a garland of the head of dead people. From the earlier times, Goddess Shakti is always described and depicted as riding a lion or a tiger, the lion is also worshipped as a '*Vahana*' (vehicle) of Goddess '*Durga*' or '*Shakti*'.

The term '*Yogini*' is related to the '*Tantric*' sects of Shaivism and the images of '*Yogini*' have been particularly placed at the outside of the temples in naked and semi-naked conditions. The Yoginis

had been depicted with sharp features and voluptuousness, which evoke sensual pleasure and an aesthetical approach (Fig-2).



Fig. 2 Yoginis of 64 Yogini temple at Orissa Fig. 3 Hat-Yogini Shakti, Credit Gogi Saroj Pal

Fig.2

Source,

Mb4

travel

<http://www.mathrubhumi.com/travel/photogallery/destination/page1/6938/26/>

In the above painting, (Fig-2) a Yogini can be seen standing above the body of a man. This may be the body of Lord Shiva, who is depicted lying on the earth in an unconscious state (Fig-4). This concept is based on a mythological fable of Goddess Kali. She was born from the brow of the Goddess Durga during a battle and took the horrible form and burst out in anger. She was destroying everything but Lord Shiva laid down in her way and was trampled by Kali. Suddenly she realized the state of her anger and its consequences. The posture of Yogini is very much similar to that fable of Goddess Kali. In this context, it can be observed that in Indian mythology, there are certain icons, which are somehow related to each other; here Yogini could be an incarnation of Goddess Kali.

On the contrary, Pal's Yogini (Fig. 3) is entirely different from the prevalent concept of Yogini and completely devoid of anger and rage. In her painting, Pal has replaced the male figure with a tiger. The Yogini of Pal is standing on a tamed tiger, which is looking like her pet. It seems that the Yogini is not articulating any mythical fable, originated by patriarchal society but she is powerful enough to construct her own story (Elinor, 2011). Her divine calmness, which is apparent from her gestures, reminds us of the fact that she is not serving anyone's purpose, and is engaged in soliloquy. The tiger in the painting plays a very significant role and it is treated equally by Pal alongside the woman.

The tendency of violence and anger, which is particularly associated with Goddess's imagery is entirely avoided by the artist in the portrayal. Pal reinvented the female protagonist along with the tiger to oppose that politicized imagery of womanhood in which the Goddess has been equipped through patriarchal hegemony. It may be said that the origin of Goddess Kali is related to the welfare of Gods and society, where her existence is solely dependent upon the needs of men. She used to appear only at the times of war with the evil spirits and demons. In Pal's paintings, the Goddess serves no one, she is the tamer of the tiger rather than riding on it. After looking at the tiger, it can be observed that he is looking like a pet of the Yogini. He is in a mood of relaxation like the Yogini, who is standing on the tiger in a yogic posture. The colour application is quite vibrant and appealing where deep blue and bright yellow has been chosen by the artist.

If it is compared with the stereotype of a previous Yogini figure, there can be numerous aspects, which differentiate them from each other. Pal has avoided the beauty and ornamentation and replaced the ferocious tiger with the decent one. It is also observed that the protagonist of the Hat-Yogini Shakti series is not related to any mythical story, they belong to the woman of the contemporary era, they are getting victory over the difficulties at their own will. She is not born for the philanthropic purpose like fighting for others or doing battles for other's sake, she is busy in herself, she is invented for the realm of an earthly woman- not for Godly woman, she is a simple creature in herself, and her tiger is like her, very relaxed with its calm gesture.



Fig.4 Goddess Kali on Shiva



Fig-5 Hat-Yogini Shakti

Fig.4 Source <http://cdn4.artofthetitle.com/assets/resized/sm/upload/kn/io/xp/e5/Goddess-kali2-800px-0-660-0-0.jpg?k=32d565d879>

Fig.5 Image Curtsey: Gogi Saroj Pal

Yogini is sitting on a tiger, which represents her supremacy and victory over male sexuality because masculinity which is associated with a tiger or lion is threatened by the female protagonist. From the painting itself, it cannot be ascertained whether this is a tiger or tigress, but the male identity of the creature has been affirmed by the artist during her interview with the author. The anger and strength of the tiger have been tamed by the protagonist after making the tiger her pet. It is frequently mentioned by the artist in a personal interview with the author that she is more concerned about the issues related to the objectification of women through male-dominated society and the academic/historic reluctance to credit women's contribution in mythological stories and artworks. In her words,

I have learned through literary treasure in which I have found mythical icons like Kamdhenu, Hatyogini Shakti, and many more. I was also very fascinated during my study that there is a description of nine *rasas* or delight, which was generated through a male presence in the female body, so the representation of women has been associated with man. A woman has always been associated with man: their existence in art has been dependent on the actual or psychological presence of man. Then I started rethinking and I have got my questions or issues, then I have taken such aspects as a whole and started to initiate a dialogue with them in my paintings. (G.S. Pal, Personal communication, 21 May 2015)

After observing her statement, it can be inferred that she is questioning the absence of female power to resolve those issues related to gender politics through her paintings. In this way, she has depicted the tiger symbolically for sarcasm where the Yogini is engaged in Yoga and not even interacting

with the viewers like the Yogini of Orissa and shifting her very gaze.

She is portrayed naked but her nudity is not so appealing compared to the ancient Yoginis because the main structure of the body has been drawn devoid of sensuousness. The decoration and ornamentation are particularly avoided by the artist because her protagonist's attitude is free from the objectification of females. They are not impressing the onlookers by sensual display or by commercialization like the ancient Yogini forms that were exhibited with voluptuousness. In her own words: 'I don't want to decorate the surface, I just want to express myself in my way, even I don't bother whether the painting is bought or not, it is liked or not, my art is free from such concerns'. (G.S. Pal, Personal communication, 21 May 2015)

So, here the feminine icons are celebrating the frivolousness of ancient Goddess in their manner either for the relaxation of mind or as a satirical comment upon the patriarchal set up of the society. In this celebration, the tiger plays an important role because without the tiger the onlookers could not get the point of Pal's dialogue. As Lord Shiva, the God of Shaivism or Tantrism is often painted seated on the skin of a dead tiger. Pal has depicted the Goddess more powerful than him because Shakti is seen seated on a fearsome tiger. She has invented her Goddess for the empowerment of women, where she inspires them to get rid of the shackles of patriarchal society and find their way to become powerful. According to Gadon, 'In taming the primal power of the tiger, making it their own, Indian women are reclaiming their own unmanifested Shakti(female cosmic energy), even the title of this piece reflects Pal's desire to motivate women to break their desires and speak up in their own interests'(Kuehnlenz, 2007)

Kamadhenu: Engendering the Imagery

In this series, Pal has invented a hybrid woman, which is half woman and half animal. Kamadhenu series is also a remarkable instance of Pal's versatile imagination and metaphysical thinking as a feminist artist. The word Kamadhenu is particularly used for the cow, which is always associated with Hindu mythology. According to the mythological records, the Kamadhenu is a spiritual Goddess in the form of a cow and originated during the mythological event of the churning of the ocean. The cow is also known as the mother of all cows and related to prosperity (Doniger, 1993). There are several images, in which the body of a cow is considered as the Hindu pantheon. In contrast, the Kamadhenu of Pal has been depicted in a sarcastic way against such mythological interpretations of society because it is the place, where on one hand the cow is worshipped and on the other hand it is mocked for its submissive character. The statement is very common and familiar in Indian society, '*Gaye jaisi hai, or bilkul Gaye hai*' (as docile as the cow) to describe someone's tameness. In Indian society, approximately all want to have a woman/girl as docile as cow. It is expected of women that they will remain obedient to the whims and fancies of their male relations, be it before or after marriage. The cow is treated badly in current society for its innocence and docile character.



Fig.6 Sculpture of Kamadhenu Fig.7 Kamadhenu

Fig.6.Source https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/9b/Batu_Caves_Kamadhenu.jpg

Fig.7 Gogi Saroj Pal, Kamdhenu 1(1995), Gouache on Paper, 56x76 cm. Source Gogi Saroj Pal
The present scenario of Indian women is not very different than that of the cows who toil their lives for the prosperity of the family but treated badly by society. In this way, Pal has merged this dual identity of cow and woman as a whiplash on the face of this patriarchal society.

In the above image (fig.6) of a sculpture found in a cave of Malaysia, there is a cow with a female face, resembling the same hybridism like the Kamdhenu of Pal. In the conversation with Pal, it is found that she explored the mythological fables and ancient literature of the world, where this Kamdhenu imagery influenced her practice immensely. Being hunted by the sad plight of women in the present day patriarchal Indian society, her conscience found some striking similarity between the conditions of the cow and women. As a response, she scripted her own story to question these issues after equating the situation with the gender bias of Indian society. Women in Indian society, mostly suffer from dominant patriarchal practices. In society also, there is the existence of two types of woman, the first one is an earthly woman in the form of daughter, wife sister or mother and another one is worshipped in the form of heavenly women or goddesses. This perception of society is entirely different for the two categories. The Goddess or Devi is worshipped with full respect while the ordinary woman is mostly neglected and treated as an object or commodity.

If the Goddess is compared with the ordinary one, it is found that the imagery of Goddess had been only created to motivate ordinary women politically as per the constructs of the male dominant society (Wangu, 2003). She is motivated by the mythical figure of Lakshmi and wishes to mould/transform herself into a mere clone of such an unreal figure while she enters the marital life. She wishes to identify herself as the reincarnated Sita when her husband is in trouble. The psychological transformation of the real self into mythical divine identities helps them to role-play successfully. In this way, it can be inferred that there are plenty of Goddesses, who influence the lives of all women, where their role and duties are politically misconstrued after giving the instance of these Goddesses. Gogi Saroj Pal has taken this vast majority of mythological politics and then

questioned the situation of a woman through this series of her work. In Kamdhenu, she has taken the myth of Kamdhenu and then represented it to spread awareness regarding social inequality towards women. In this way, the animal imagery has been equipped by the artist to criticize the duality of societal construction, where a woman is often neglected from their self-exploration and identity. These mythological perceptions are often used for the direction of social code of conduct for the marginalization of women because women are expected to serve the society to satisfy those politicized icons and her will has no value for these gender-bias norms. As stated by Pal 'the kamadhenu (cow Goddess) is a dominating phenomenon for all Indian women Indians according to mythology, the Kamadhenu would grant its owners all their wishes without demanding anything in return, and her wish does not matter to anyone'. (G.S. Pal, Personal communication, 21 May 2015)



Fig.8 Kamdhenu, Source: Pal



Fig. 9 Kamdhenu Source: Pal

Kamdhenu is mostly painted in white tones, which is the natural colour of cow, and her legs and hands are painted in bright hues of red and orange. This style of painting hands and legs could be an attempt to portray the practice of *Mehndi* (a mixture of leaves) and *Alta* (a red liquid pigment), generally used on the occasion of marriage and post- marriage ceremonies by women. In Indian society, *Mehndi* is considered very auspicious for a bride or newly wedded woman but it is forbidden for the widows because it considered an auspicious thing along with the *Sindoor* (a red powdered pigment applied in the *Maang-* a spot creates in the forehead by the separation of hairs by Hindu married women), the *Bindi* (a colour dot applied on the forehead by the married woman). Women in Hindu culture are socially bound to apply these things after marriage for the long life and happiness of her husband. The red hands and legs of Kamdhenu are offering the same culture to its onlookers but in a sarcastic way, and narrate the story of a married woman, who is restricted in her sphere. She is not alone but the institution of marriage has also been addressed symbolically in the paintings with the absence of her husband. The red colour, which is applied to the hands and feet, is also a symbol of traditional marriage. The red colour is also representing the ambitions and desires of the woman, which also has her own life rather than serving others. The figure is also painted as spreading all over the surface and sometimes it just coming out of the surface, particularly in Kamdhenu. This adjustment of the figure is appearing as to come out from the surface, is representing those boundaries of house, where a woman is bounded and dominated by the society

either physically or mentally. She struggles to break the barriers but in the process becomes marginalized. The woman experiences the same situation as a cow in Pal's paintings because the cow is tied by a post at one corner of the house and could not go anywhere without the will of her owner. Likewise, a woman is also bounded by the patriarchal hegemonies mentally or physically to act as per male's command. The naked body of the woman looks melancholic as her face looks pale and her head bent towards the side. Pal's protagonist is approaching to reconsider the gender binaries and to reform the role of woman as a human being, and they are very engaged in their work and targeting the prevalent hierarchies of Indian society. During an interview with Nirupama Dutt, while being questioned on the issue of her concern for women, Pal stated...

'I have never felt apologetic for making a woman the main focus of my work. I am rather proud of being a woman and tarrying to unravel through my work what makes a woman, how much of a woman is conditioned, and how much natural' (Dutt, 2014).

The emptiness of background and space represents the isolation of a woman's life as Pal herself has gone through various ordeals in her life and has been emotionally attached to those issues. She reformed and relived those experiences in her way. About Kamdhenu, she mentioned further that

'Let me fulfil the wish of the cow instead because I am not a blind follower, I have my perceptions about everything, and when no one is addressing to the wishes of the cow, then why should she fulfil people's demands or desires. Thus, every issue for any subject painted by me is a response against such unequal value'. (G.S.Pal, Personal communication, 21 May 2015)

Such notions can be directly or indirectly related to the gender politics created by a male-dominated society, in which women play the role of the housewife and cater to her family's demands. She is a remarkable artist and a scholar, who not only explored the literary accounts but also adapted those myths and facts after analysing them with a feministic approach. She realized the lack of institutional practices and chronological records in respect of womanhood and then worked on it tremendously to reform the status of the woman through paintings. She also added that...

'People say of Kamadhenu, she is so good-she can fulfil all your desires! Interestingly, no one has ever asked about what Kamadhenu herself may desire-if she desired...how can her wishes be fulfilled?' (Sen, 2014).

Conclusion:

In the paintings of Pal, animals play a major role to communicate the very desire of an independent and aware woman. Animals have become a tool to convey the lack of a subjective approach in the world of paintings. In the history of art, animals remained a repetitive motif but the otherness of confronting and subverting that erotic or gender-biased animal imagery is appropriately done by Gogi Saroj Pal. Numerous series of Pal is based on the recreation of animal imagery into feministic forms (Kalra, 2011). The very first aspect is the rejection of previously structured animal imagery, derived through sexual politics because Pal has associated them with the feminine concern only. Another is the reincarnation of Goddess imagery in the form of half-animal and half-human, which is also a novel style of the artist. Without merging the animal imagery with women, Gogi Saroj Pal

may not give the expression of her quest against gender politics because animal imagery has been associated with the onlookers for a very long time. Animals have remained an important and significant part of human life and they are frequently adopted in paintings like other motifs. In this way, Gogi Saroj Pal has painted them in her path of rebel against gender politics to demolish the previous imagery.

.On the contrary, people also fear the strength and force of these animals. To some extent, animals being a part of human life from the very foundation of civilization, even the art of the pre-historic period depicted animals. It is mentioned by Pal, that she was a dedicated scholar of mythology from her childhood, and after growing, she started to analyze them gradually in respect of a woman. She has removed the male-association from the narratives and then invented her fables to critically comment upon the current status of women in our society. The animals occupy a huge space in her paintings, and in Hat-Yogini and Kamdhenu series, it can be observed that the structure of animals is bigger than the woman. This kind of space adjustment represents the dominancy of animals in Pal's paintings.

Unlike the ancient female characters or Goddesses, they are involved in their self-exploration, after taming the forceful animals. The female protagonists of Pal are free from all the burdens of society including clothes, ornamentation, and proportioned body structure, etc. as compared to the standardized imagery. Being naked, they are not manipulating any kind of offering or seduction, but they are enjoying their freedom and spirit of the feminine. The colour application is quite supportive of the theme and emptiness of the space is harmonized through a balance between the animal and woman. The nudity of them is not portrayed for the male-cantered society but their beauty and sexuality have been considered more apt for reforming the prevalent social and mythological perceptions. The Shakti and Kamdhenu of Pal oppose the objectified imagery of the Goddess and then turned them into a subjective approach. The animal imagery has become a medium to criticize the male-dominant themes. For instance, if the painting series of Pal (having animal imagery) is compared with the series without animals (woman only, without any animal association), it can be observed that those based on animals are highly feministic compared to the other one. Going through the observation of Indian paintings, it is found that animal imagery stands for male power and often dominates female imagery. But Pal has broken this stereotype of animal imagery and changed the object (woman) into the subject. Moreover, the social construction of male dominancy has been depicted symbolically in the form of an animal by Pal and her protagonist is displayed as breaking this barrier and then celebrating her sexuality with power.

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