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Women on a Ledge - *Illustrated Feminist Identities from India*

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Abstract

Feminism, as documented and theorized in western history, is often said to have its early beginnings in the second half of the 19th century as an important paradigm of social reform. Given the rich history of visual culture and arts in India; to trace the development and transformation of local and contemporary Indian art forms, especially illustration, offers a unique avenue to discuss the on-going relevance of this form as a mode of expression in the context of gender, specifically the "female".

This paper traces and examines the history of the image in India through ongoing culture shifts in the contemporary times while also talking about the author's personal history and briefly how it shaped her work. It then, examines the work of select Indian women image-makers and illustrators in contemporary times through interviews with them. Through these conversations, there is a similitude in thought and expression drawn about the female imagery as represented in the now, and how the stylistic and thematic forms have evolved and responded to the on-going shifts in cultures and politics of body, personal expression, and identity.

What is a "desirable" female image? Who is promoting the female image? Why do these women subvert, shift, and negotiate female imagery? What is their imagery in response to? These are some of the questions the paper will investigate. It will also try and extrapolate the shifts in visual culture and the socio-political framework within which these illustrators operate, to express themselves, but always with an emergent feminist voice.

Introduction

Women on a ledge

To understand Indian feminism, delving deep into one's own history of personal and societal struggle is a great starting point. If the Indian freedom struggle radicalized women and bought about new reforms in thoughts, then the post Independence years have consolidated those early efforts.
From anti-dowry campaigns in the '80s, to anti-rape demonstrations in the '90s, to the third wave feminism and finally Post-feminism of today; Indian feminism has taken on a path of it's own that has brought it into closer contact with the struggles of women throughout the country today.
In India feminism has to operate within communities rather than individually. It is hybrid, yet rooted; western in theory but Indian in practice; rationalist in inspiration but at the same time forced to come to terms with patriarchy. Contradictory? Very Indian I think. Much like the Indian Nod.

The "ledge" is a self-coined metaphor, to define the individual or collective spaces Indian women are all at today. Some of us wanting to fly off the ledge in happiness to newer heights, some of us wanting to jump off it in frustration and an eventual feeling of defeat. This, depending, on the kind of socio-economic space one comes from in today's India. I talk of the ledge to also talk about where we all stand as The Modern Indian Woman. Can we realize that one can be free from the pressures and influences of the outside world, and move out of the stereotypes?
The ledge also signifies the narrow space that we are allowed to occupy today in this country and the narrow berth we are given to error. It also is a space that addresses the actuality of the lives of these women. Because of the power and domination we have always been subject to, women continue to lose out on so many autonomies. The existential, the bodily, the economic, the social and the political.

The personal is political

My family can be categorized into the large group of people who call themselves The Middle Class[i] in India. I grew up watching strong contrasts in the families of my Mother and Father. Both my parental family histories were etched in strong middle-class values and were patriarchal families. But as I recall the finer nuances and differences, the big thing that stood out was that there was no prejudice or restrictions in my mothers' family towards women as compared to the women in my fathers' family. The liberty that my grandmother (and mother) made available to themselves, were far greater in comparison to the women in my fathers' family. To have these liberties in a strongly patriarchal and developing nation was nothing short of a small victory for them. My grandmother, a wanderer and a reformist, my mother, a lawyer, led simple lives and constantly encouraged everyone around to explore, cultivate and develop their own interests. This was in stark contrast to the way I was bought up. I grew up in a strongly patriarchal, orthodox home in comparison to my mother, because of my father's upbringing. I was always subtly made aware of my gender by him, by asking me to behave in a certain way in public, talk softly, wear appropriate clothes; there was always disapproval in everything I said or did. But socially the first time I became conscious of my gender, was when I was eleven. Getting out of a crowded bus, I got my backside pinched by a stranger, who then disappeared into the sea of people on the street. I felt rage for the first time in my life. That was also the first time I became conscious and ashamed of my body. The politics of my body was making me rebel.

Do visual memories change perceptions? Do these images from memory inform your visual understanding or the visuality of your work? Visual stimuli can either be productive, distracting or of no consequence. The form is a strong stimulus.

Most historical studies of memory favour analysis of the textual, visual or oral representations of the past over the pursuit of evidence for responses to those cultural artifacts.[ii]

I am now going to pursue this evidence to present the artifacts that influenced my work, my ideas and me.

The form of a bird, a flower, a telephone, a book is what you form your first impressions or memories of, when you see them for the first time. That in turn automatically or subconsciously shapes your art, ideas, and your values.

According to Luck[iii], Visual short-term memory is a memory system that stores visual information for a few seconds so that it can be used in the service of ongoing cognitive tasks. Compared with iconic memory representations, VSTM representations are longer lasting, more abstract, and more durable.

When I think back to my first visual images or influences of the female form, there are memories from the age of 4. And they are all perfect. In the book titled

'Measuring Up: How Advertising Affects Self-Image', Vicki Shields asserts that seeing the same image of a youthful, beautiful thin women leads to men and women having an impossible ideal of what a woman should look like and puts physical appearance at the forefront of a woman's mind.[iv]

The first visual memory I had was of a clay figurine of an Indian dancer with a bobbing head. She was very beautiful and her bobbing head was a huge fascination for me as a 4-year old. She would nod and bob her head all day and acquiesce to everyone's views in that room. Like the perfect woman she was expected to be.

Another strong memory is of a calendar art image of a very pious, feminine woman holding a lamp[v], with her head covered with a *pallu*.[vi] It hung there in our home for years. These Indian female forms all had very similar physical characteristics – non-sexual, yet full-bodied, large eyes, well-formed mouth and fair skin.

Another reference was of the formidable *Lalita-ji*[vii], the protagonist from the "Surf" washing powder television and print ads. Lalita was the upright, moral and not- to-be-messed with stereotypical Indian housewife who had a no-nonsense attitude about everything from relationships to the rising price of vegetables. In stark contrast to this was Nandana Sen. She was portrayed as a modern, yet coy woman, being compared to a sexual thing in a shoe polish advertisement. I distinctly remember not being able to decide, which of these women I wanted to be, when I grew up.

The other big visual reference was the educational charts my classrooms. In one of the charts, titled "Adarsh Balak" (The ideal Boy) I remember asking my teacher, why were only boys portrayed in all the good behavior charts. Was there no chart for an "Ideal Girl" or were only boys considered ideal and had good habits and she had no answer.

Amar Chitra Katha[viii] was a large part of every Indian child's life growing up in the '80s. Their visual style was very captivating, colorful and attractive. Reading it as a child was one thing, but reading it now as an adult is another. The subverted imagery of women presented in these comic narratives is quite offensive. The way each story is organized and presented, one wonders if the women had any worth at all? Were they just pin-up models and did they really have any say in society then? Did these readings blindly make us child-readers reinforce the patriarchal model? Along with that (unsurprisingly) the female form continues to be always beautiful, have stunning bodies and wear risqué clothing. Stereotypes, as viewed by Gove and Watt[ix], not only shape the way we perceive other people but they also shape the way we behave, and people being active players in the development and construction of their own identities, can change themselves within limits to fit their understanding and views of gender. Gove and Watt define masculinity and femininity as often adopted gender-typical behaviour of people to form and fit with the identities they construct. In most of the stories, the women were socially obliged/attached to a man all their lives. The allusion to the social,

political, economic factors of the storyline being male centric, continues to promote this thought process with the readers. As a child growing up in India in the 1980s, you assimilated these images; they consumed you, because there was little (or no) referencing or stimuli.

Barbie and Ken dolls, Bollywood stereotypes, calendar art of Indian goddesses, women from Raja Ravi Verma's paintings, the 'b-grade' movies or local porn, the list is endless. The Indian female stereotype had finally arrived. What does feminism actually stand for? The feminist movement in India began parallel to the Indian freedom struggle. There were some artists, filmmakers, poets, activists, writers who over the years, began to challenge traditional roles of women, addressing topics such as women in domestic and public spheres, and the conventional standards of beauty. Critics found this battle for gender equality imprisoning; not believing that it could have a bearing on the art. Artists also investigated how societal pressures and mass media inform and shape expectations of women. The female experience truly began to take positive affirmations when women began creating female bodies from their point of view. This is always powerful and draws a different point of view. Artists like Amrita Sher-Gill, who were considered one among the pioneers of Modern Indian Art; was one of the first female artists to start exclusively working with the female form and exploring its facets.

This study was done in the hope that it will help me gain a deeper connection to my work and the direction it should head in. Am I a radical-feminist? A socialist feminist? A third-wave feminist? A reformative feminist? An eco-feminist? Or am I part of the large generation of today that is post-feminist? Do I, like Chitra Ganesh, believe that there are different types of feminism and that one must be true to their own or can one just say I am a feminist, now what? Or do I just simply like exploring the female form because I feel comfortable doing so.

Reality leaves a lot to the imagination

The feminist movement began parallel to the Indian freedom struggle. There were some artists, filmmakers, poets, activists, writers who over the years, began to challenge traditional roles of women, addressing topics such as women in domestic and public spheres, and the conventional standards of beauty. Critics found gender imprisoning; not believing that it could have a bearing on the art. Artists also investigated how societal pressures and mass media inform and shape expectations of women. The female experience truly began to take positive affirmations when women began creating female bodies from their point of view. This is always powerful and draws a different point of view.

All the illustrators/artists interviewed in this article are inspired by the Indian visual culture, personal experiences and their own identity of being a woman – in body or mind. We discussed a lot of possibilities of beauty, desirability, titillation, body image, female sexuality and childbearing as words attached to the female form. Even though they modestly brush it off, these women are making statements and forcing all to think and question.

Their visual canvases are experiences that are telling of a new kind of female form emerging in India and sending out a powerful message to so many.

Manjula Padmanabhan

Manjula has been illustrating since I was a child and the "Target" magazine was a rage amongst teenagers. The "Suki" she speaks about in this interview became a national star amongst many women of the 1980s and scandalized many a patriarchal Indian man. It later ran as a newspaper strip and is now compiled in a book. Manjula is an illustrator based out of Delhi and has a large body of work in various publications and books apart from Suki. She is based out of Delhi.

Why do you explore gender in your work? What drives you?
Manjula: I didn't choose to draw women. When the editors I worked with, needed an illustration for an article about women's issues they would turn to me because I was a woman.

Where does Suki fit into all of this?
Manjula: A character can either be male of female – or an animal, plant or non-human! While deciding what gender/life-form to use for my comic strip, I created Suki as an extension of myself. But she very soon became her own person. I didn't struggle to create a separate persona; it's just something that happened over time.

Of course, much of what controlled my choices was what I could get done in a short while. My Suki deadlines were always so short that the ink would be still be wet when I rushed to the Sunday Observer office once a week. The evolution of Suki as someone distinct from me was also to do with ease. People would see me and say 'Oh! You've just come back from Europe, haven't you?' - because in the strip, Suki had just returned from a trip. People seemed to think I was serializing my life! That was annoying. I am a fairly private person and I didn't especially want to share the details of my life with all the readers of the SUNDAY OBSERVER. Suki remained single and essentially

unemployed, stuck forever at the age of 25. By contrast, I have always earned a living, I am not single and I'm much older than 25 – I am currently 61.

Have you seen a shift in the way a woman's image is portrayed in your own work in the last 10 yrs?
Manjula: Suki in the weekly "Double Talk" strips was a freer agent than the Suki of the daily strip at the Pioneer. She could do all sorts of exciting things. She could grow four arms, could talk to aliens, could travel in space. She was also a friend (to me). She could comment on things that maybe I couldn't say in real life. I didn't set out to make statements with Suki's appearance and character. I liked to think that she lived a life that I occasionally reported on – not that I forced her to be my puppet. For instance, she continues to be a feminist where I stopped calling myself one many years ago.

Why the resistance to the word Feminism?
Manjula: If someone wants to insist that I am a feminist, I shrug and don't argue; but personally I don't like the term. I find it limiting. It's a label and I don't like labels.

There are so many definitions of reality, of people in general and of women in particular. For example, tribal women – in the jungles of South America, in Borneo, the Congo - can we make statements that include them alongside teenage girls in New York city, peasant women in China, bankers, engineers and housewives in India? There are so many different philosophies; different politics that govern each group. If we can train ourselves to think of women as "people" rather than specifically "FEMALE people", we might have a better sense of reality.

As a writer and illustrator the question of how to create accurate representations comes up all the time. I often think we talk about the wrong things -- but what are the right things? I am more interested in issues that affect both genders. We focus on all the difference between men and women but we can't seem to wrap our minds around the many areas of "samenesses".

Mao Ze Dong famously said 'Women hold up half the sky'. But I don't want half the sky – I don't want to belong to the group that holds up only half the sky. I want belong to the group that holds up the WHOLE SKY.

The term LGBT -- now there's the letter "Q" as well – I understand why it's important to those who use it. But it seems to me a shame to create yet more divisions. I would prefer it if we could remove a few differences instead of creating new ones.

Have the changes in popular/cultural/political and social shifts affected your work and why?
Manjula: As an illustrator I took some decisions very consciously – for instance, very early on, I tried to present women fully clothed, and as personalities, rather than symbols of womanhood. By contrast many illustrators and artists (especially in the past) depict women as curvaceous, overtly sexual beings, with very prominent breasts, big hips, long nails, long eyelashes – and YOUNG. Older women are very rarely the focus of an illustration. In the popular art of the 60's – and many early articles and books about feminism – nude women with flowing hair were a symbol of freedom from oppression. At the same time, scantily clad women are extremely attention-getting and they're used to sell all kinds of products, from fancy cars to cosmetics. To avoid falling into the trap of drawing "sexy" women, I tried to focus on providing realistic clothes, features and expressions. I wanted to create characters, not just female bodies.

Every decision includes statements about culture and social politics. If you show a woman in a sari, then the kind of sari, the pattern on the sari and even how it is tied – all of these visual decisions are coded for class and community. Suki's shapeless pink kurta[x], blue jeans and open-toed kolhapuris[xi] were part of a conscious choice to provide a female character that was NOT "dressing up for the camera". I tried to be conscious of such things as jewelry/clothing. By introducing the character called Sweetie I was also trying to address the differences between women. Sweetie was overtly "feminine", she wore make-up, elaborate clothing and jewelry. Just by providing a contrast to Suki, she was making a statement – but Suki was the main character of the strip! So I was also making it clear where MY sympathies lay.

Do you subvert the female form in your work and why?
Manjula: I don't think I set out to be subversive. Not directly. I'll give you an example. In the 1980s I was asked by NBT to create a picture book aimed at young children. The brief was to make a 16-page book. I chose the theme (and title) "A Visit to the City Market". I chose to portray the scenario of a mother and two children going to the market to shop as a way to generate conversation in a young reader.
Right away, I had to decide whether to make the mother middle-aged or young, slender or fat, in a sari[xii] or a salwar[xiii]? The character had to be someone I could repeat throughout the book, someone who would be likeable and familiar to young readers. Amongst the choices I made was to present the mother without jewelry and without a bindi[xiv]. THAT was my level of subversion: by showing a woman who, at least for some readers might appeared to be

a widow, or a woman who did not follow the typical VISUAL norms of an Indian Mother, I was quietly suggesting that all Indian women, regardless of social status or community, could aspire to be the focus of a children's book. Illustrators make choices of this kind all the time. Are they making them consciously or not? I don't know. Mostly it is subconscious, I think. What I try to do - I don't know how far I succeed - is to make at least some of these types of socially significant choices consciously.

Every book is an opportunity to make a point. This book was a breakthrough for me in many ways. Just one example was skin colour: what colour was best? Who should be dark and who should be light? What messages does each of the colour choice suggest? Do I mix brown and ochre and white and pink to get a middle-brown? And then it finally occurred to me! The majority of Indians are a simple, straightforward BROWN. Not jet black, not creamy white. Why do we constantly try to create some special, diluted brownish shade? That was the first book in which I used undiluted Burnt Sienna of waterproof inks and that was that!

Final thoughts on female images or the symbolism attached with it. Is there a perfect female image?

Manjula: Being realistic is important to me, both in visual and written work. I've been talking about symbols and symbolism, so maybe we could end this discussion with a few thoughts about depictions of goddesses. I find it very interesting that typical Indian goddesses are shown to have pink-white skin and film star features - big eyes, thin eyebrows and a full mouth, always slightly smiling but in a gentle, "modest" way (her teeth and tongue are not shown, for instance). She is presented as non-sexual, even though she is always overtly beautiful, full-breasted and broad-hipped.

By contrast, real women, as we know, are very far from being always-smiling, overtly loving and all forgiving! Real women can be sexually demanding and greedy, jealous and unforgiving. Is it possible to ask whether the violence being expressed towards real Indian women through harassment, sexual assaults and murder is in some way related to the MISMATCH between the Goddess and the Human Woman? Are young Indian women being punished for NOT being goddesses? Would our perceptions change, as a society, if there were even one goddess depicted wearing jeans and a tee shirt?

But then there's the Kali figure too! She's strangely attractive in spite of her hair, necklace of skulls and dripping tongue. It's like she's the visual symbol of the knowledge each of us has that there's another definition of womanhood, another "Goddess" form - and it is indeed wild and powerful. But she is so powerful that she suggests the same violence that we should all be trying to avoid, whether it is expressed towards mortals or demons.

So maybe we should be looking for ways to integrate the formal depictions of ourselves so that, as a society we can move towards more realistic expectations.

<u>**Chitra Ganesh**</u>

I corresponded initially with Chitra Ganesh over email and phone. She was really helpful, despite being in the middle of her show in Bombay. The next time we met personally and she was so generous with her time and open about her work and ideas. Chitra is an Artist/illustrator based out of New York.

Why do you explore gender in your work? What drives you?

I have always been interested in how gender affects the way bodies represented like social constructs of gender, how the body is represented in the popular culture, what are trends and what seems to be glaringly absent. It is thinking through what is absent and present through visual canons that have inspired me to create my own representations, that I could insert into the thinking about gender and perhaps alter the way in which our kind of conversations might happen**.**

Can you talk about reconfiguring of mythologies that feature in your work?

In terms of mythologies and folk tales and fairy tales, women are never primary characters of protagonists in their own right but ancillary figures to the heroes. Examples like Surpankha[xv] and Draupadi[xvi]; these women's violation, abduction, disfigurement or loss of any sort, serve as a catalyst for the hero to engage in a conflict with a larger entity. These meta-concepts are often very masculine and male centric. I was thinking about that while reconfiguring the myths in my work.

Do you subvert the female form in your work and why? Could you talk about the quality of the excess that you speak of in your interviews? Is that connected to subverting your form?

I think in these times, the kind of forms I make would be considered a subversion of the dominant ones. I also notice how much rooted in a particular time and place notions of what constitutes an idealized femininity are. Lots of women who would've been considered beautiful before would now be considered fat and would be ridiculed; a lot of the temple sculpture or religious paintings today could be viewed as pornographic! Incidentally I think that even strictly delineating categories like pornography and eroticism is subverting the form.

In terms of excess a lot of things that you or I as feminists wouldn't perceive as excess are connected deeply to sexuality and class. Poor women sitting on the street is excess; they should not be there! They should be removed! A young girl wearing shorts is excess - she is showing too much skin! Both these examples are also about how bodies

occupy public space. My work is bringing these images into a larger public and observing the interaction between image and audience; inviting them to consider thinking differently since they are in a different context, about what they might have judged earlier.

Drawing and illustration provides a poignant departure for that. Since it is rooted in its psychic space, creating a phantasmagorical quality that you can bring to these representations because of the way the medium works. This allows for many possibilities to open up.

Have you seen a shift in the way a woman's image is portrayed in your own work in the last 5-10 years?
Certain things that were transgressive 20 years back like tattoos for example, are so commonplace today; part of what informs these changes is one's own changing experience in the world. I am sure that experiences, like aging or how women are perceived differently according to society; age brackets; things like these will surely inform how my own work changes. Incorporating certain kind of signifiers that might be considered straddling the subversive and incorporating those in a shifting way, is helping me along the way.

What according to you is a desirable female image? Is there one?
There's a socially constructed desirable female image; in reality, it's just as varied as a fingerprint. People often deploy the social norms regulating a girls' appearance to save face among one's own community or how a woman's appearance is important to justify her relationship dynamic. In the end though, I think what people find attractive or not is polymorphously perverse as it's always been.

How have the changes in popular/cultural/political and social shifts affected your work and why?
This is something I have been thinking about a lot myself. Is it science fiction or is it bodies synthetically altered? This idea of thinking about how to reveal different kinds of interiorities and exteriorities for certain characters is a difficult question to answer. They have been harnessed with the aesthetics of science fiction and how the body forms, in my work. I think that for myself; who is located largely in the west; there is certain kind of rule in which bodies of women who are not from that zone are portrayed; which hasn't changed much. For example, extremely over-dramatisation of the victimised afghan woman! The ground reality of these women is much more exciting and alive.

Where did the idea of the three-breasted creature in your work "The Atlas" comes from?
There is different kinds of myths that inspired this particular piece; the myth of the devis having 3 breasts and then one falls off or the myth of the Amazonian women, where they cut of one breast to perform their archery better; Mahashweta Devi's breast stories (which I was very moved by). The other thought was how this particular part of the body is such an over-determined symbol of so many things and how even making a slight shift in that would make a pretty big shift in how we think in our expectation of the ideal female body.

Teju Bahn
There are three main groups of "folk art" in India based on the context in which the work occurs. Paintings used to adorn the home and found on the walls and floors of homes in rural India; painters-cum-entertainers who travel telling popular stories through both image and performance; and those who create art in the service of temples. The commonality in these three categories is that most of the art is created by women and some by women and men together. Teju Bahn was an artist-entertainer, moving from village to village. It was chance and fate that got Teju to the city. It has been an interesting journey for this lady from rural Rajasthan with no formal education. I met Teju Behn personally as I was travelling to her city and she invited me home. Meeting someone in her own context or space is very different from a phone conversation. It was interesting to hear her speak proudly about a range of topics from her work, her children's work, world issues, what inspires her and how she wants her life to be different. Teju Bahn is an artist based out of Ahmedabad, India.

Why do you explore gender in your work? What drives you?
Teju Behn: Since I remember I earned my money by singing as a travelling singer in my village and communities around which my husband and I used to travel to.
We used to sing devotional songs early in the morning and wake up our villagers. While travelling like this as nomadic singers, we finally reached Ahmedabad. Here, we met Contemporary Artist Hakku Shah who coaxed both of us into working with him and that's how my journey as an artist began. He encouraged us to begin painting about our everyday lives. My work contexts and drawings automatically gravitated towards the women in my village and their stories and lives. Most of my singing was focused on local female deities, maybe that's why I draw so many women in my drawings. Everyday Life on the streets, on TV and other's experiences, are my primary inspirations. I think I have very astute observation and viewing and listening skills!

Why do you work with the female form?
Teju Bahn: Seeing Sunita Williams, the Indian astronaut, going to space on TV made me realise how far women have progressed today and it gave me a sense of pride like never before! I decided, I would only paint women and their

lives from then on and I was lucky to get a chance to showcase that same emotion in my book with Tara Books – "Drawings from the city".

The panel in "Drawing from the city" where the family moves to the city, tell me a bit about it. There is a very strong metaphor in it, was it intentional?
Teju Bahn: It was an unconscious decision. What matters to this family's is their material belongings, which is all they can show for; and bundles are normally round-shaped; hence I showed it as a globe, symbolizing them taking their whole world with them. It reminded me of how we moved with our family from our village to Ahmedabad.

How many years have you been doing this for?
Teju Bahn: I think 20 years or more. And I know I will continue to do it until I die.

Are you finding a difference in your style/physical appearance of your female figures?
Teju Bahn: there is definitely a change in my way of drawing women, there are now considerations of situations, angles, compositions, which were not there earlier. Another person who has helped me achieve this is Gita Wolf from Tara Books. She has, among others, guided me to become a much more confident artist.
The other contexts I explore are all the professions of rural and urban women. Also of everyday women on the streets and their routines. These are recurring themes.

The spread in "Drawings from the city" where the girl imagines herself in a plane; tell me about it?
Teju Bahn: This spread is again my experience of my first flight ever when I flew to Dehradun where I was facilitated by the government for my work. I wish women all over the country can get to fly all the time! It was one my most enjoyable experiences!

How do you visualise today's Indian woman in your drawings?
Teju Bahn: Today's Indian woman has progressed in leaps and bounds. She has touched the sky and is walking step-by-step with men, sharing responsibilities. My ideal woman is a mix of the traditional and the progressive, who is constantly on a path of self-discovery.

What will your next project be?
Teju Bahn: I have always drawn women. If I ever get a chance to illustrate a book it will be about a female mountaineer and her trials and tribulations to climb the tallest mountain there is.

Priya Kurien
The Indian publication circuit recognizes Priya Kurien as a successful children's book illustrator. Though children's illustration is something that she works on primarily, she is working hard to educate young minds about gender identity in India through her drawings. Her work is detailed, colorful and engaging. Humour forms a big part of her work. Among other things in the interview we discussed her latest project called "Eat the sky, Drink the ocean". Priya is based out of Delhi, India.

Why do you explore gender in your work? What drives you?
Being aware of your gender is an inherent trait in women across the world. I grew up in a middle-class protective home-environment in India of the '80s. The sharp awareness that you are being treated differently amplifies when you stop living with your parents, when you begin living in a large city on your own, start interacting with the world and see how people react differently to you in comparison to your male counterpart. This subconsciously starts off a chain of thoughts about gender identity, which starts reflecting in your work. In a city like Delhi, the gender politics that is played out here is something that interests me greatly. For me as an individual and an illustrator, I can safely say that post the December 2012 incident there has been a greater urge to express myself through gender identity.
My most recent work has been at a workshop organized by Zubaan, where I Mentored 15 women at a workshop called "drawing attention". These comics will soon be published by Zubaan.

Do you subvert the female form in your work and why?
I have always been unconsciously doing it. I do think about it more consciously though now. Even in the children's books that I do; the women that I draw now, physically I don't want them to look stereotypical. My woman is mostly taller than the man, awkward looking, not fair in complexion. I believe that stereotypes that are under the surface; children pick up on very quickly. It is important to make children question gender identity, because we didn't. It is important that they look at things objectively, because we didn't.

Tell me a bit about your latest piece of work.
"Eat the sky Drink the ocean" was a Collaboration between 12 Indian and Australian writers and illustrators. This happened in response to the December 2012 rape and death of a young woman in Delhi. The project was speculative fiction activity where we imagined different futures for women over brainstorming and collective think tanks. We

have always been shown the future of the world from a man's point of view; that is very different from how women imagine and what they want from a future world, so this finally turned out to a be a very different account for all of us. In my narrative, (collaborated with writer Kate Constable), the mantle of saving the earth from destruction has been taken on by women. The beginning of the story starts with no preamble. This style was adopted because I wanted our female readers on board immediately. I want women to get on board in my narratives through direct connects.

Have you seen a shift in the way a woman's image is portrayed in your own work in the last 5-10 years?
Growing up, I always drew my women blonde, thanks to Betty from Archie comics. Curvaceous and pretty thanks to the Bollywood stereotype. As a child you assimilate these images, these images consume you.
Today my women are consciously moving away from the traditional form and stereotype. I solidly believe that quirks are what make a person. Gaps in teeth, facial features, chin hair, each feature must look more interesting than the other.
My main character in the narrative "Eat the sky, Drink the ocean" isn't a traditional beauty, she's almost girl-woman, her sexuality is non-conformist.
Another conscious decision I have made is to definitely illustrate older women! No one wants to show them in drawings. I think they must feel ignored! I want to make an effort to include them in my imagery. There is a conscious decision to start drawing women of all colours, ages and sizes.

How have the changes in popular/cultural/political and social shifts affected your work and why?
India is a country of great contrasts. Here we wrestle not only with issues of gender but also with class and race. Delhi being the capital city is always alive, buzzing, and full of controversy and also a city where there are tragedies. Post December 2012, everything I illustrate is a stronger, urgent need to express myself through gender and identity.

What according to you is a desirable female image? Is there one?
There definitely isn't one according to me! Everyone has good and bad days. A body can never feel perfect, male or female. To learn to live graciously and in a non-judgmental way; that is the best thing one can do for themselves. Accept that your body type is the best!

Janine Shroff
Meticulous, disturbing, surrealist, is the first impression one gets when looking at Janine shroff's work. She works with the female form in various contexts. Androgynous forms and women's reproductive identities both being her favorites. Janine is an illustrator based out of London, UK.

Why do you explore gender in your work? What drives you?
I don't specifically explore gender. That is too clinical and academic an approach for me. I explore the things that interest me and since I am female, on most occasions they may lean towards certain things politically or culturally. Some of my figures or characters are androgynous and that has always appealed to me. None of them do things specifically prescribed to either gender except perhaps for the ones about birth and pregnancy.

Do you subvert the female form in your work and why?
It depends on the context. I certainly don't do it consciously. Some of my more recent work looks at how I view the role of women in procreation, which both fascinates and repulses me. This has been a running theme for some years where I've examined certain aspects of that in each drawing. E.g. The Breeders, The Queen most recently, & The 3 goddesses from a few years ago.

Have you seen a shift in the way a woman's image is portrayed in your own work in the last 10 years?
Not too much. I've never drawn women from fashion magazines or from comics, who usually tend to be hugely idealised from a male perspective. So any drawing evolution happened naturally as part of the process of improving technique and drawing. Some pieces relied on references (Turkish bath) but those references were relevant to the context of the piece, which was 1920's influenced. My figures used to be skinny, almost inhuman when I was 18 but over time fleshed out a bit.

How have the changes in popular/cultural/political and social shifts affected your work and why?
I've grown more interested in specific branches of politics, which have filtered into my work. But mostly my work is quite personal so none of these things affect it consciously, but if it exists it can filter through. For example Rape Rick, Modern Insight (Russian dolls) are both drawn from cultural context about anxiety and how women are expected to be versus how they are.

What according to you is a desirable female image? Is there one?
I don't know if there can ever be a desirable female image. There is certainly a mainstream model presented to us, which is increasingly growing unattractive to me. The typical " femme" female, makeup, dresses, heels, the more work it looks like to achieve on a daily basis, the less I find it appeals. It tires me out just looking at them.

Conclusion/Thoughts

The significance of putting together an article of this genre was simple. It has not been done before in the Indian context. The article visits a conceptual conjecture - of women wanting to work with the female form.
How is a woman's gaze different from a man's? How does that difference influence the ways in which this gender views the world and how they create their images? If they are feminist, then does their art and culture collide; is trying to also illustrate and incorporate that culture deeply ingrained into our Indian female minds? All these questions were answered in the affirmative and with similitude of views; in the process finding great kinship and sisterhood with all these women.

How can a woman feel the beauty of a form, the intensity of a colour, the quality of a line, unless she is a sensualist of the eyes? – Amrita Sher-Gill

Diversity was the main criterion while choosing this group of women. These were illustrators/artists from the times when being feminist was a way of being to the third wave/post-feminism image-makers. One thing is common with all the illustrators featured here and me. We work with the female form because we connect to it deeply. We might/might not explore gender specifically or purposefully as a primary subject. The strong identity and subversion of characters and stories happens from the subconscious.
Interviewing them was the best way to connect with them about their work. When people write about themselves it's more distant in comparison to when they answer pointed questions. The impromptu form of the interview helped elicit much more honesty and straightforwardness. This article is to understand each of their journeys and definition of the self as a woman of Indian origin. Furthermore this has helped me figure what drives me to create women and talk about only their lives in different social settings and situations.
While tracing their rich body of work, there is a resolution that one can choose to be whatever kind of feminist they want to be. Feminism to me is definitely **TO BE.**
This is the key to the experience and projection of identity and the form. There is no one female image. We carry with us a myriad of visualities, like we also carry and exhibit a variety of emotions.

If they see breasts and long hair coming, They call it woman,
If beard and whiskers, They call it man.
But look, the self that hovers in between is neither man nor woman.
- Devara Dasimayya 10th century devotee of Shiva

Free, undeterred, brave and full of spirit is feminism. We choose what we want to take forward from our personal histories and shape our own. I did it despite being asked to play various traditional roles in my life. I do want to jump off that ledge. And be.

Authorship

Title: Illustrated Feminist Ideas from India
Publication status: Unpublished; written in a persuasive and descriptive style manuscript.
Author: Manasee Jog
Approach:
Methodological:
Personal history takes one back to justified belief systems and if this makes your identity; then questioning it with evidence of your philosophical, cultural and social growth.
Justified belief systems include non-awareness of being a feminist while being one.
Affirmation of theories through interviews with women from similar identities, life paths, interests and ideologies.
Research aim: Delve into aspects of the history of the female body plus image and how it is represented with qualitative data.
Research strategy: Interprative, theoretical, cultural perspectives to help analyse my questions and explain observed behavior/belief systems.

Research methods: interviews, questionnaires, observation, archival research.
Data recording and representation: interviews

Theoretical*:*
Gender studies and post-modernism image making.
Problem: The female body is portrayed in a certain way in image making through history in India that is skewed towards tittilating, desirable and helpless.
Objective: to discuss the on-going relevance of illustration/image making as a mode of expression in the context of gender, specifically the "female".
Question: Can I define the above problem through my personal history and how it shaped my thinking towards my work?
Sub-Questions:
What is a "desirable" female image?
Who is promoting the female image?
What have been the shifts in visual culture and the socio-political framework in India in regard to image making?

Author Bio

Manasee Jog is an educator, visual artist, designer, and illustrator. She has been teaching at Srishti Institute of Art, Design and Technology since 2010. As an educator, her philosophy is to empower students to be constantly curious through triggers and inculcating critical thinking in the classroom.

As an artist and designer trained in design, applied and visual arts; her practice explores how traditional forms of making in a technology-driven world can help in developing context. This happens through thinking, questioning and shaping informed opinions while making the connections between the obvious and the abstract. For inspiration, she looks at gender, elements of play, art, design, and personal histories: navigating between different disciplines to interrupt and disrupt processes and patterns.

Citation

Adam Timmins, review of *Memory and History: Understanding Memory as Source and Subject*, (review no. 1470) P.8, http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1470

Steven J. Luck, 2007, "Visual short term memory", Scholarpedia, 2(6):3328. Accessed September 2014. doi:10.4249/scholarpedia.3328

Michaelides, Alyssa, (2005), "Hidden Messages: Advertising and the Messages They Send to Society about Women" Senior Honors Theses. 84. Eastern Michigan University. http://commons.emich.edu/honors/84

Haleem, Shamala, (2104) "Challenging Gender Stereotypes: A Text Analysis of Qaisra Shehraz's Novel the Holy Woman", National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, DOI: 10.7763/IPEDR. 2014. V74. 10

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End notes

[i] The *middle class* is a class of people in the middle of a social hierarchy. In socio-economic terms, the middle class is the broad group of people in contemporary society who fall between the working class and upper class.

[ii] Adam Timmins, review of *Memory and History: Understanding Memory as Source and Subject*, (review no. 1470) P.8 http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1470

[iii] Steven J. Luck, 2007, "Visual short term memory", Scholarpedia, 2(6):3328. Accessed September 2014. doi:10.4249/scholarpedia.3328

[iv] Michaelides, Alyssa, (2005), "Hidden Messages: Advertising and the Messages They Send to Society about Women" Senior Honors Theses. 84. Eastern Michigan University. http://commons.emich.edu/honors/84

[v] The original painting, *"Glow of Hope"* or "*Woman With the Lamp*", by S.L. Haldankar, was painted around 1945 and is displayed in the Art Gallery of the Mysore palace. Reproductions of paintings were still an important motif of the time, being found in almost every middle-class home.

[vi] The loose end of a sari that is worn over the head and shoulder to indicate dignity and modesty.

[vii] The usage of this word is similar, but not identical, to another sub continental honorific, *sāhab*. Similar to the Japanese honorific san, *ji* is gender-neutral. In this case it is used to honor the lady in question, Lalita.

[viii] Founded in 1967, ACK comics have more than 400 titles that retell stories from the great Indian epics, mythology, history, folklore, and fables in a comic book format. It was created by Anant Pai, and published by India Book House

[ix] Haleem, Shamala, (2104) "Challenging Gender Stereotypes: A Text Analysis of Qaisra Shehraz's Novel the Holy Woman", National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, DOI: 10.7763/IPEDR. 2014. V74. 10

x A loose or fitted collarless tunic worn by people from South Asia generally accompanied with another garment as a bottom.

xi Kolhapuri footwear are Indian hand-crafted leather slippers that are locally tanned using vegetable dyes. Kolhapuris as they are commonly referred to are a style of open-toed, T-strap sandal worn commonly by both women and men.

xii Sari is a garment from the Indian subcontinent and typically it is a long piece of cloth 4.5 metres in size that is wrapped around the waist and one end draped over the shoulder.

xiii A pair of loose trousers, tapered to fit around the ankles, worn by women from South Asia with a kameez (usually accompanied by a kameez)

xiv A decorative mark worn in the middle of the forehead by Indian women.

xv Surpanakha is a character in the Indian mythological epic Ramayana. She plays an important part as the antagonist's sister. As a woman her portrayal in the myth is very misunderstood.

xvi Draupadi is the most important female character in the large Hindu mythological epic Mahabharata. She is the wife of the five main kings of this epic.