



# Depiction of Women in Ajanta Paintings {Gupta Period}

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## ABSTRACT

Since the beginning women have been always a center of attraction in various aspects of human life, in their different roles and images like mother, sister, daughter, beloved and finally occupying the place of a goddess, the source of Shakti to gods. These forms of women have reserved a favorite place in Art and literature. The status and connotation of womanhood can be defined appropriately through the visual art of a particular time. Indian art also portrayed women enthusiastically. In fact, there is enough scope to establish the real identity of a woman, either concealed in symbolic forms or highlighted by her decorative charms. Paintings are used as a medium to revisit the role of women the society. Ajanta paintings are the treasure of women's portrayal. This Paper is a humble attempt to find those treasures, especially the secular forms displayed in the paintings of Ajanta caves in Gupta Era.

**KEY WORDS:** Art, Painting, Women, Ajanta, Identity

Art is something that has been created with imagination and skill that is beautiful or that expresses important ideas, feelings, or concepts. An artist's work such as paintings, sculptures, etc. conveys a message. It is a form of communication. It means whatever the artist intends to mean. The expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting, or sculpture, produces works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power.<sup>1</sup> Painting is the practice of applying paint, pigment, color, or another medium to a solid base called the "matrix" or "support". The medium is commonly applied to the base with a brush, but other implements, such as knives, sponges, and airbrushes, can be used.<sup>2</sup>

In art, the term *painting* describes both the act and the result of the action (the final work is called "a painting"). The support for paintings includes such surfaces as walls, paper, canvas, wood, glass, pottery, leaf, copper, and concrete, and the painting may incorporate multiple other materials, including sand, clay, paper, plaster, gold leaf, and even whole objects.

The Gupta Period is often called the GOLDEN AGE OF INDIA because it was marked by extensive inventions and discoveries in science, technology, art, literature, logic, religion and philosophy etc.<sup>3</sup> The Guptas were best known for their pious love for Art and Literature. Gupta Empire was founded by Maharaja Shri Gupta but Chandragupta I was the first renowned king. The Empire lasted until 550 AD and covered much of the Indian subcontinent. In this course of time, India was fortunate enough to experience a chain of able rulers like Samudra Gupta, Chandragupta 2, Kumargupta, Skandagupta, etc., who bonded India with a patriotic thought of Indianness<sup>4</sup>. Development of Art and Culture with enormous wealth, education, trade, religious tolerance, etc. are the main features of the Gupta period. Art and Music attained its zenith in this period. In the words of Vasudeva Sharan Agarwal, painting in the Gupta era attained its fullness.<sup>5</sup> Although there are a few examples of Pre-Gupta paintings also but they have lost their charm in the course of time. By the time

of Guptas, painters developed their art super brilliantly. The famous examples of the history of painting of this era are from the mountain caves named Ajanta located in Aurangabad district of Maharashtra and Bagh near Gwalior in Madhya Pradesh. Among these, the paintings of Ajanta caves are famous all over the world. Ajanta caves are numbered from right to left, except for the later discovered cave 29, located high above Cave 21. Also, cave 30 is located between caves 15 and 16, nearer the river bed.<sup>6</sup>

Since the beginning women have been always a center of attraction in various aspects of human life, in their different roles and images like mother, sister, daughter, beloved and finally occupying the place of a goddess, the source of shakti to gods. These forms of women have reserved a favorite place in Art and literature. Indian art also portrayed women enthusiastically. In fact, there is enough scope to establish the real identity of a woman, either concealed in symbolic forms or highlighted by her decorative charms.<sup>7</sup> Ajanta paintings are the treasure of women's portrayal.

The status and connotation of womanhood can be defined appropriately through the visual art of a particular time. Paintings are used as a medium to revisit the role of women the society because art is always related to socio-cultural traditions. and strongly connected with the taste and demands of the individual. The earliest history of painting in India started in the form of a mural at Ajanta (2nd B.C. to 7th CE). The main theme of the cave temples of Ajanta was Buddhism and whole paintings were depicted in narrative form. In the portrayal of womanhood, the graceful female icons have been painted in the form of queens, dancers, mistresses and other secondary forms. Women of Ajanta are the art of connoisseur's delight. The Ajanta artist has painted a whole range of women characters. women are the symbol of love, compassion, beauty and emotions. The women of Ajanta are well-known for their superb gestures and sublimity in semi-naked and naked form. The exotic and sensuousness of divine Apsaras Nayikas, dancers and other forms have been depicted after following the prototype of Indian Shadanga (the six limbs of Indian painting).<sup>8</sup>

In this research paper I really want to appreciate the efforts of the artists who did their best to find femininity in women's various but typical characters. In the paintings of the Gupta period, we find women playing different roles as social members and as individuals.

**As Nayika:** In Indian art, women are enthusiastically portrayed as Sur Sundari, nayika, surbala, and Devangana with all their beautiful aura. There are no typical image features for nayika, in iconography.<sup>9</sup> Apart from the women who are marked with their special vahanas, symbols, ayudhas, all two-handed women are kept generally in the category of nayikas. There are descriptions of nayikas and their different forms in literature like Amarushatak, Rasmanjari and Amarkosh<sup>10</sup> etc. In this form, women are portrayed in natural feminine beauty.

In Ajanta , we can see many paintings of nayikas.....

Black princess, cave 1.<sup>11</sup> lady at her toilet cave 17,<sup>12</sup> dying princess cave16,<sup>13</sup> lady with two toes cave2,<sup>14</sup> and lady at her swing cave2<sup>15</sup> are the best examples of nayika figures. lady at her toilet cave 17 which is dominated by the queen, attending to her toilet, has two more maids by her sides.....the noblewoman of this painting is completely devoid of any kind of upper garments, the maids are fully dressed<sup>16</sup>. Dying Princess is suffering from the pangs of separation from her lover. This is often called the depiction of Nanda and Sundari.<sup>17</sup> . in the Black princess cave 1, the free flowing line, subtle rhythm of the body contour, the slight tilt of the face and the carves of the eyes ,all show the mastery of the artist and his control over the brush.<sup>18</sup> The portrayal of a lady with two toes cave2 is extraordinary. the woman is standing adjacent to a pillar, turning her left leg and resting on the pillar. Adorned with ornaments, the lady has slightly tilted her neck.



Cave 17

**Depiction of physical charm and feminine beauty is dominant in this form.**

**As Apsara:** Apsaras are related to divinity. they are described as wives of Gandharvas, the musicians of Indra's Sabha. Their mesmerizing beauty is considered remarkable in devlok<sup>19</sup>. The Apsaras and queens of Ajanta are often portrayed with full rounded breast and broad hips as per the six limbs of paintings, with beautiful grace and divine gestures, the significance of women in Ajanta are remarkable. The apsara of cave 17 is adorned with beautiful hairdressing. and ornamentation. This apsara has been identified as such merely on account of her superhuman charm and elegance. The kind of hairdo shrouded with the bunch of flowers she has got, and the rich types of necklace and the earrings she has put on, make her appear as one of the most ideal beauties of her times.<sup>20</sup>.. The main attraction of Gupta art is the celestial females of eternal beauty. The portrayal of Devine's beauty with feminine charm is the main purpose of the artists in which he has attained full perfection.



Cave 17

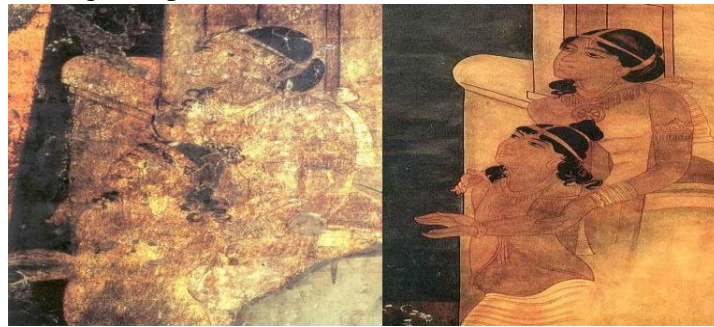
**In Mithuna Figures:** In this form, shringar plays a dominant role. This is the symbolic depiction of fertility. The accented expressions of mithuna in Indian art and rituals have been a thing of wide interest both to scholars and general readers. Nothing that is utterly and severely single can produce anything. In fact, the union of males and females provides the key to the understanding of the religious symbolism behind BRAHMA and MAYA, SHIVA and SHAKTI, GOD and his creative will, etc<sup>21</sup>. Ajanta artists have liked to portray mithuna figures in order to show the all-round prosperity of this period resulting in the easy and happy way of life where SHRINGAR plays a dominant role. they are symbol of fertility. Madhupayi dampatti of cave 1<sup>22</sup> is a lovely portrayal of Sringar, where wine is increasing the hotness of the atmosphere. king and queen of cave 17<sup>23</sup> is another example of togetherness.





Cave 1

**As Mother:** Women have always been loved and respected in their mother form. The ideal depiction of a woman in the character of a mother is very sincerely portrayed in Ajanta paintings of the Gupta period. The feeling of unconditional love, compassion and sacrifice is depicted in this form. In a scene entitled Mother and Child (Cave 17), the large composition of Buddha has been drawn to add more concentration to him than the woman in the painting. This painting is generally called Yashodhara and Rahul. Although, as per the aim of the painting, this way of emphasizing the main figure has been done to enhance the figure of Lord Buddha, which was a priority of the artists of these caves, giving Rahul as bhiksha, Yashodhara reaches the height of sacrifice. The pain and compassion can be seen in her depiction. The whole scene successfully presents mixed feelings of spiritual inclinations and human emotions<sup>24</sup>.



Cave 17

**As dancer and musician:** In this particular form, a woman is depicted as a master of dancing skills. It is a combination of beauty, actions, and emotions.<sup>25</sup> Guptas were lovers of dance and music. Sculptures, paintings, and the evidence of literature prove the point. Ornate hairstyle, attractive ornaments, seductive postures, tribhangi mudras are very well carried in this form. In cave 1 dance and music sequence is portrayed in a scene where the movement of the dancers can be wisely seen. The woman in the middle is the center of attraction. She is in a moving posture and other gorgeous ladies are singing and playing music with various instruments.<sup>26</sup>



Cave 1

**As Royal Ladies** Women belonging to royal palaces are painted in this form. The royal lifestyle can be seen here. The lady at the swing, the lady with the mirror, and the dying princess are remarkable representations of royal life. they are adorned with minimal costumes and ornaments. In these pictures, the majestic splendor, dignity and nobleness on their faces are found everywhere.<sup>27</sup>



Cave 17

**As Female Attendants:** In this form Women are shown as a helper to royal ladies, like, prasadhika, chatradharini, chamardharini, bhringardharini,<sup>28</sup> etc. point to be noted is that they are equally beautiful like other ladies. their attire is more attractive than royal ladies. some examples can be seen in the paintings of a lady with the mirror, cave17, in dance and music sequence cave1, dying princess cave 16, etc. some foreign helpers are also seen with caps kurta with full sleeves.



Cave 16

The women discussed above are the treasure of emotions, movement and beauty. they are generally represented in sambhang and tribhanga mudra. all the styles are influenced by contemporary literature. No emotions are left undepicted.

## Attire and Ornaments<sup>29</sup>

In the Gupta period, women used to have varied forms of clothing and a distinct taste in fashion. Some of the components of their attire and ornaments that are found in Ajanta paintings are;

**Attire:** Generally, the word Anshuk is used for clothes.

- Kurpasak, stananshuk or stanpatta jacket of half and full sleeves are upper garments,
- Dukul, was used to cover the lower part .it was like Ghaghra or sari. Nivi was to be tightly wrapped by Nivibandh
- Uttariya was a kind of shawl or dupatta.
- foreign paricharikas are painted with their cap, head scarf, and handkerchieves.

Stitched and unstitched both kinds of clothing can be seen in Ajanta Paintings.

## Ornaments;

- Churamani, Mukut, Chaitula tilak,
- Nishka, Muktahaar, Mukta wali, haaravali, Haryashti

- Karnaphul, kundal, manikundal,
- Angad, keyur, Valaya, katak, Anguliyak,
- Mekhla, kinkini,
- Nupur

Various types of flower ornament are also well used in the paintings..  
These attires and ornaments are very well described in contemporary literature.

<https://purushu.com/2018/06/clothing-ancient-india.h>



Women's costume and hairdress, Gupta period: A- Queen (from Gupta gold coin), B- Votary (Ajanta, Cave II), C -Attendant (Ajanta, Cave I), D- Maid Servant (Ajanta, Cave XVII), E- Court Lady (Ajanta, Cave I), F- Princess (Ajanta, Cave I), G- Court Lady (Gwalior Museum), H-Female Votary (Ajanta, Cave VI), I- Maid (Ajanta, Cave XVI)

## Women in Contemporary Literature

Some of the contemporary Literature in which the minute details of a woman's physicality and emotions are beautifully illustrated are as follows:

- Works of Kalidas

### The dramas: -

- *Abhijñānaśakuntalam* ("The Recognition of Shakuntala")
- *Vikramorvaśīyam* ("Urvashi Won by Valour")
- *Mālavikāgnimitram* ("Malavika and Agnimitra")

### And the epic poems: -

- *Raghuvamśam* ("Dynasty of Raghu")
- *Kumārasambhavam* ("Birth of the War God")

### And the short poems: -

- *Meghadūtam* ("Cloud the Messenger")
- *Ṛtusamhāram* ("The cycle of the seasons")

- Kamasutra of Vatsyayana

- Natya Shastra of Bharat Muni

- Amarkosh of Amar Singh



**It seems like all the paintings are based on Shadanga(Six Limbs)** (Based on Jaymangala{Tika on Kamasutra} By court artist Yashodhara Pandit, of King Jai Singh Of Jaipur(1100AD)Ancient texts defined six important aspects of painting. These 'Six Limbs' have been translated as follows:<sup>30</sup>

- Ž *Rupabheda*: The knowledge of appearances.
- Ž *Pramanam*: Correct perception, measure, and structure.
- Ž *Bhava*: Action of feelings on forms.
- Ž *Lavanya Yojanam*: Infusion of grace, artistic representation.
- Ž *Sadrishyam*: Similitude
- Ž *Varnikabhanga*: Artistic manner of using the brush and colors.

The women painted in Ajanta are exactly represented according to shadanga stated earlier. It seems that the mother and child is an excellent example of rupbheda, Darpansundari and dancers can be categorized in pramana, dying princess, and mother and child are painted under bhava, nayikas and apsaras are portrayed under Lavanya yojana and sadrishyam. In totality, all six limbs can be easily seen in these paintings.

## Major Takeaways

- Ž Indianization
- Ž Feeling of divinity is prominent
- Ž Combination of beauty and emotions
- Ž Portrayal is very natural
- Ž Ideal feminine charm is seen everywhere
- Ž Complementary of Literature
- Ž Based on shadanga

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