



GENDER ARTIVISM IN INDIA: PAINTINGS AS CATALYSTS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

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Abstract: Historically, homosexual relationships and identities were a part of Indian culture, which can be traced from the ancient sculptures and the figurines in temple architecture. The notion underwent a pathbreaking transition with the colonial intervention, leading to the social seclusion of the non-normative identities. They were legally discriminated against and faced aberrations. These homophobic perceptions, which were deeply disseminated in the cultural notions of India, marked a significant shift, with their expression in popular media, like literature, paintings and movies. Though the contribution of literature and films in the propagation of LGBTQ+ communities is widely discussed, the involvement of painting seems to be disregarded, indicating a major gap in gender discourses. Therefore, this study analyses the paintings of India from the past to the present, discussing LGBTQ+ themes and attempting to trace the narrative potential of paintings as a contributor to social change. Through the adoption of a mixed qualitative approach of interpreting the visual codes and the cultural principles painted in the artwork, this paper also attempts to learn how the visual narratives amplified the voices of the marginalised communities. Through the ekphrastic analysis of Mughal paintings, works of Bhupen Khakhar, Kalki Subramaniam, etc, the study unfolded that the paintings have the same narrative capability to transform society, like literature and films and many artists who belong to LGBTQ+ used painting as an autobiographical or biographical expression that surpasses the limits of language and is a powerful 'artivistic' tool. Based on paintings, further studies could also explore the possibilities of paintings as a capable means of information dissemination that underwent deterioration due to the rise of digital media and AI technologies.

IndexTerms - Paintings, LGBTQ+, Ekphrastic analysis, Artivism, etc..

I.INTRODUCTION

Like literature and other art forms, paintings are significant in articulating social events and issues. They represent the natural world and happenings in emblematic, aesthetic, and realistic ways, intending to disseminate the told and untold meanings of the real world, more simply, without relying on language. As the Western epithet says, India is the 'Land of Kamasutra'; the gender dialogues and LGBTQ+ representations in Indian mythology are a common theme found in ancient Indian paintings and sculptures. The paintings and sculptures found in the Khajuraho temple and the rock shelters of Bimbetka, examples from the *Mahabharata*, and Vatsayana's *Kamasutra* are examples of the portrayal of human sexuality. Though gender fluidity is a widely discussed topic in Indian art, culture, and mythology, it has always faced exclusion and misrepresentation in the mainstream of society, from the Colonial period, which continues even today, because almost no work has been found so far on the depictions of sexuality in colonial India, because it is seen that, it challenges the notion that gender identities are rigid and only dualistic (Dasgupta, 2011). The aftermath of colonial outlook about LGBTQ+ was homophobic, which signifies a wide range of negative attitudes towards people from the LGBTQ+ community, resulting in discrimination, exclusion, and denial of human rights (Wade, n.d.). Though there are films like *Fire* directed by Deepa Mehta in the year 1996, analysis of the art history from the past to the contemporary, shows only a limited number of artisans, artworks, and studies in visual arts, specifically paintings could be identified, which explores the theme of gender heterogeneity and the artists who have painted on gender narratives faced censorship and erasure from the artistic spaces for challenging the traditional binaries. The movie *Fire* puts forth a primordial idea on how social structures restricts queer desires in order to nurture and sustain conventional notions related to sexuality. The article focusing on the Queer representations in art works explains that art works like, language, paintings, films etc can fight against the normative social structures that are dominating and subverting non normative sects, as it can travel through multiple ages and eras enabling the audience to read and reread the ideas which was prevalent comparing to the existing scenarios (Bhupinderkour, 2025). Reviewing the contemporaneity of the topic, it is evident that the disregarding of creative freedom and the segregation of people belonging to queer community from the normative spaces are still prevalent, and are the indications of the stereotypical notions prevailing in the society. Pertaining to the negligence faced by the community, this study aims to specifically analyse the history of Indian art and how it, as a medium, disseminated the idea of gender diversity through the reading and interpretation of visual elements attached to the images. The paper also looks forward to addressing the oddities of the queer based artworks and the reason for the underrepresentation of this theme, as it is can be considered a denial of human rights. This study focuses on the interpretive analysis of the visual artworks, i.e, paintings produced in the Indian artistic scene from the pre 19th century to the present, based on the theme of gender diversity, through its

cultural, political, and visual elements incorporated, to consider how much paintings played a significant role in conveying the idea of divergent sexuality, in breaking the stigma associated with it and act as an 'artivistic' tool to disseminate the real idea among the society.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The reviewing of the studies conducted so far on the representation of LGBTQ+ or Queer identity in art suggested that most of the works done are based on the employment of queer identity in genres like films, dramas and literature. The previously done research highlights the role of art as a medium for social transformation, with the integration of modern artists like Bhupen Khakhar and Kalki Subramanyam. It underlines the potency of visual narratives to initiate social change, their capacity to shape ideologies, perceptions, and collective consciousness, which is still lacking regarding the inclusion and acceptance of queer communities, their struggles to be the part of the society continues (Christopher, 2024). In Indian art, Bhupen Khakhar's works gained much more popularity in illustrating the non-conventional gender perspectives and ideologies. His works are central to most of the existing studies based on the visual representation of gender diversity. The paintings of Khakhar cannot be treated just as the byproduct of his artistic imagination alone, because the semiotics he implemented in those works are symbolic of his inner self. The article titled *Making World, Making Way: Queer Belongings in Indian Contemporary Art* offers thoughtful insights into the idea of homosexuality and the specificities, which unfolds the stigmatized notions in Indian society, where it is always believed that LGBTQ+ or the queer identity is unnatural and secretive. The research rather focuses on the social aspects of queer sexuality, which is based on desire, togetherness, friendship, etc (Mukhopadhyay, 2022).

Gender issues are widely discussed in various genres across the world, especially in Indian culture and traditions. Sexuality and gender diversity are so common that ancient literature and temple arts are examples of it. In the further examination of the studies conducted, an article unveils how literature in India depicted gender and sexualities across the period. The article analyses that the concept of LGBTQ+ has its roots in the Queer studies and women studies which originally developed in 1990s but in India it became so popular recently. The author names Indian writers like Kamala Das, Shobha De, Ruth Vanitha, etc, as significant contributors to Queer literature (Gothwal, 2022). Further analysis of the works also ardently discusses the need to accept the community as a part of the social order, though there are many initiatives that have happened addressing the issue, no evident transitions have happened to the community, and the perspective of the general public towards them. Another recently published article discusses the pedagogical impact of queer novels in the learning and understanding of queer communities. It reveals that queer literature plays a significant role in educating contemporary readers (Jain, 2025). From the extensive survey of literature and the analysis of the contemporaneity of the issue, it is found that, even though many theoretical steps have been taken to ensure acceptance and inclusion of queer people, the community still faces marginalisation. Based on the existing knowledge, through the analysis of the visual arts produced so far in India on Queerism, this paper delves into the limitations and possibilities of incorporating paintings as an intermediary in learning and understanding of the LGBTQ+ community, thereby contributing to an inclusive and ordinary life.

III. METHODOLOGY

This descriptive study adapts a multimodal interpretive approach to the visual semiotics contained in the paintings, such as the chromatic techniques, theme, cultural background, etc, integrated with the theory of gender studies. The work attempted to revisit the visual artworks produced across the years, ranging from ancient centuries to the present, by different artists, including Amrita Sher-Gil, Bhupen Khakhar, and Kalki Subramanyam's representations of gender and sexuality. The works chosen for the studies are taken from various eras, which are identified as the benchmarks of the transitioning approaches towards gender and sexuality based depictions, by cross-examining the themes and techniques implied. From the homoerotic representations in Mughal miniatures to the contemporary paintings and illustrations of Kalki Subramanyam, the art withstands all the wear and tear happened in the perception towards gender and sexuality. The study situates the paintings based on non-normative representations within the Queer theory, which is an interdisciplinary field that critically examines the conventional norms and obstacles associated with gender and sexuality.

IV. FINDINGS

From canvases to activism, art has been transformed into a powerful medium of knowledge dissemination. The neologistic term 'artivism' gives a nuanced vision about the possibilities of art as a medium of idea propagation, which in simpler terms can be defined as the semantic mechanism of integrating art for a social cause and transformations (*Artivism - Migramedia*, n.d.). The idea behind the concept is not just to represent the social issues as such, but to enable the audience to understand and relate to the idea being discussed, thereby applying it to their social as well as personal lives. The exhibition entitled *ME- WE* is an example of art as creative activism, during which the organisers exhibited sculptures, paintings, comic strips, and a mini library with books that discuss matters related to sexuality and individuality (Matra, 2018). The discussion on homosexuality is not a recent addition to the artistic realm; the mentions found in the ancient textbooks, sculptures and paintings validate the argument, but the further analysis of the artworks, review of literature based on homosexuality, asexuality, or LGBTQ+ communities shows that the discussion of LGBTQ+ communities and their lives is less compared to other topics like patriarchy. *Sleeping Hermaphroditus* is an example of an artwork carved on marble stone depicting the transparency of sexuality (McDermon, 2016). Hermaphroditus is known in mythology as the son of Aphrodite and Hermes for having both feminine and masculine features. The sculpture created in 1620 is based on the ancient feminised depiction of men (*Discover Depictions of LGBTQIA+ in Art Throughout History*, n.d.) Based on the contemporaneity of the discussion, the lack of artworks about homosexuality and queerism in the Indian context hints at the stigmatised perception that is still prevalent in society. An article based on the representation of queer community in literature points out that texts or literature play an important role in understanding, fostering empathy in the readers and asserts the pedagogical impact of queer novels (Jain, 2025). In this context, this study aims to learn the stigmas and the reasons for the smaller number of paintings associated with the theme. Finally, this paper attempts to unfold the prejudices and possibilities linked to art as a medium of knowledge propagation. The narratives chosen for the study are the paintings taken from antiquity to the contemporary, based

on the themes that are presented. The works chosen for the study, *Ladies of the Zenana on a Roof Terrace*, *Two Girls, You Can't Please All*, and *Purple Princess*, are synchronistic with the thematic portrayals, which are the depiction of the LGBTQ+ community. *Ladies of the Zenana on a Roof Terrace* is a Mughal miniature, painted in 1666 by the artist of the Rajput Court (Ruknuddin, 1666). The artwork is a watercolour painting done by incorporating ink and gold on paper. The poetry and works produced during the Mughal era were rich in homoerotic content; they carry multiple orientations of sexualities and eroticism. There were prescriptive Sanskrit sexual narratives translated into Persian languages for the new rulers (Penrose, 2006). *Ladies of the Zenana on a Roof Terrace* is an example of the homoerotic depictions popular during the period, portraying women dressed up in traditional attire sitting and enjoying the terrace. Two women are placed as the central characters in the painting, accompanied by their maids. The central characters are painted in a romantic and intimate posture, as lovers spending time together hints at the affection they had for each other. The maids sitting around the central figures are portrayed as engaged in tasks to please the protagonists. Though the protagonists are surrounded by maids, their posture and intimacy show how drenched they are in one another.

Gender variance and same sex intimacy were so common till the colonial invasion in Indian history, but with the colonial administration, the idea of same sex intimacy got subverted, resulting in the reduction of overt LGBTQ+ context, which attained a sudden leap by the early 20th century through artists like Amrita Sher-Gil. Her modernist paintings are a blend of East and Western artistic traditions, compiled with the lived realities of ordinary people. Most of her paintings deal with women, rural lifestyle, and the depiction of the marginalised. Sher-Gil's works are also plotted for homosexual narratives. The painting *Two Girls*, published in the year 1932, is a monochromatic painting about casual intimacy between two girls in which one is partially naked and the other is fully naked (Sher-Gil, 1939). The inculcation of the monochromatic technique suggests a serious approach by the artist towards the situation. The paintings of Sher-Gil were subjected to controversies, as most of her works were based on womanhood and self-portraits that are apart from traditional notions.

The late 20th century for Indian art was exploratory because of the attempts made to include themes that were secretive and unnatural. Narrative paintings of Bhupen Khakhar fall under this age, which discuss the everyday life of the people. Khakhar incorporated bold and bright colours to narrate the themes of homosexuality, intimacy, vulnerability, and loneliness. The painting entitled *You Can't Please All* is a polychromatic painting, which speaks about self-awareness and the crisis of a homosexual person to fit into society. The work depicts a man in the nude standing on a balcony, watching the happenings of the world, which shows the disparity (Khakhar, 1981). Compared to the Mughal miniature and the work of Amrita Sher-Gil, Khakhar's paintings are explicit about the sexual depictions. Another painting of Khakhar, known as *Two Men in Benaras*, confirms the idea that paintings for Khakhar were an emancipatory action to proclaim his identity to the world. The *Two Men in Benaras* depicts two naked men in a tender, intimate embrace. The erected penis and the depiction of a private space apart from the outside happenings are indicative of the sexual identity (Khakhar, 1982).

Ladies of the Zenana on a Roof Terrace, *Two Girls, You Can't Please All*, and *Two Men in Benaras* are examples of homosexuality. Though the background and the setting are different in each of the paintings, all these paintings are similar in conception. The private background and the intimate posture given to the characters of the paintings are indicative of the traditional concept about homosexuality, that homosexuality or LGBTQ+ identity is uncommon and shares a secretive nature. Amrita Sher-Gil's painting *Two Girls* is not explicitly about a lesbian relationship, but it can be interpretative as it when analysing the figurative representations and other visual elements. Her paintings are always a reflection of women's private and public lives. The elusiveness of male figures and the depiction of female fraternity and friendships hint at the feminist point of view. Eliminating male figures and including a female figure in place can be seen as a threat to men or as a challenge against normative principles (Dasgupta, 2011). While Khakhar's paintings are a kind of autobiographical activism. He attempted direct portraiture of queer identity through thematic, semiotic, visual and discursive analysis. Compared to these paintings, the works of Kalki Subramaniam are self-reflective and polychromatic, filled with fluorescent colours.

The painting *Purple Princess* is a portrait of a woman wearing flowers in her hair. The dominant colour in the painting is purple or lavender, which is symbolic of her transgender identity (Subramaniam, n.d.). The merging of blue with pink to form a purple shade can be considered as the transformation of a man into a woman or vice versa. Further analysis of the paintings chosen for the study shows that nudity, intimate posture, and private setup are the common semiotics chosen by the artist to represent queer sexuality, while Kalki Subramaniam has adapted a chromatic symbol to narrate the idea of gender.

V. DISCUSSION

Examination of the artworks reveals their adherence to certain archetypes and stigmas associated with homosexuality. The paintings chosen for study are illustrations belonging to different ages, ranging from the ancient period to the contemporary scenario. Over time, many major changes have happened in the learning and understanding of art. Art is now considered more seriously, and it is approached academically; that difference is evident in the paintings produced. The visual elements incorporated are more or less symbolic of the central theme or the idea intended to communicate, other than being a mere aesthetic representation. From the review of the literature and the paintings chosen, it is understood that though the representation of homosexuality in visual narratives has become common, the works produced are still subjugated to the cultural norms, especially in the case of India. Even when India is addressed as the land of the Kamasutra, painting intimacy in India is controversial (Varma, 2018). The painters who have painted such themes were always called 'salacious artists'. Amrita Sher-Gil and Bhupen Khakhar are examples of this. The paintings *Two Girls* and *Two Men in Baneras* depict a homoerotic relationship biologically. Both paintings have placed the concept in the interiors of the room to show privacy. These paintings can be considered a tool for protest, as the private spaces are indicative of the concept that sexuality is purely personal. While the painting *You Can't Please All* points out the struggles faced by a gay person to fit in society. The character in the painting is depicted as naked, symbolising his sexuality, watching the happenings outside the room. The loneliness and discrimination faced by him are depicted in the painting. For Khakhar, his paintings based on sexuality are the visualisation of his 'coming out', which is why most of his paintings are representations of community and friendships (Mukhopadhyay, 2022). He breaks the stereotype of withholding his LGBTQ+ sexuality from being represented in public. Kalki endorsed chromatic methodology to disseminate the idea of trans sexuality. Her paintings are loud and colourful, each colour describing the gender fluidity. Review of the art history and the works based on sexualities is less compared to other issues, and the artworks that discuss the issues may not be instructive and reflective of the real idea and purpose. In 2018, a group of artists from the LGBTQ+ community from Kerala conducted an exhibition primarily based on homosexual intimacy as a step

forward (Varma, 2018). Though such exhibitions are popular, it is again sidelined as just an art exhibition. In such a scenario, it is important to let the audience know about 'activism'. Integration of painting as a tool for social transformation in the curriculum can be an effective step to bring out more artworks focusing on issues like gender and sexuality. Equipping the students and artists with the idea of homosexuality as natural can be another effective method to wipe out the stigmas, and enabling the artists not to constrain their creative freedom is another measure that can be adopted. The lack of artworks and artisans dealing with sexual diversity is mainly due to the unchanged misconceptions interwoven with it. In order to claim equality, it is important to adopt measures to eradicate the issue, but more simply and joyfully, and activism is an effective tool for it.

VI. CONCLUSION

The study attempted an interpretative analysis of learning about LGBTQ+ interventions in Indian paintings. The paintings chosen for the study are particularly selected from different chronological setups to depict the transitions happened so far in the articulation of art and the idea of sexuality. Examination of the paintings and the visual elements integrated implies the aesthetic and socio-cultural representations to which the art is confined. With the theoretical intervention of queerism, the paintings are reflective of the LGBTQ+ concerns in its thematic representation. The works mainly depicted nudity and the physical intimacy of the characters in a private setup, drawing the border between private and public. From the survey of research works, it is understood that, though artworks have attempted to portray sexuality and nudity, due to the prevalence of the stigmas, not many artworks are produced and those available artworks are sidelined as obscene and the artists as 'purveyors of erotic art'. Further learning shows that art history has always marginalised non-normative identities and such gender expressions from mainstream society, because it challenges traditional binaries, and their struggles continue even today. The research conducted so far on the topic identifies the contributions of artists like Bhupen Khakhar and Kalki Subramaniam in propagating the idea of inclusion and equality, but the number of artworks and studies also hints at the lack of awareness of the topic, as well as the perception of treating these works as erotic artworks. Unlike the West, in India, every art serves a purpose of didacticism or dissemination of knowledge, thus the paintings chosen for the study are also historically relevant and referential in learning the idea of LGBTQ+ or queer identity. But the lack of research articles marks the significance and necessity of including themes that have the ability to transform the social order. The confinement of LGBTQ+ identity to nudity and sexual intimacy in art is a major downside of the topic, which can only be rectified through activism.

VII. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

N/A.

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