

FEMALE ARTISTS IN SRI LANKA:

Problems of Representation of the Female Subject and Issues of Agency

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Living *in* a female body is different from looking *at* it, as a man. Even the Venus of Urbino menstruated, as women know and men forget. (Tickner 1987: 266)

Introduction

In this paper I will primarily deal with two issues. The first issue deals with the dynamics and politics of artistic production of women artists in Sri Lanka. The second issue is directly tied to the concerns of the first: the problems in the manner in which they represent women or the female subject in their artistic output. In addition to the aesthetics of the female figure, I am also interested here in the meanings that are inscribed on that figure, and hence the representation of the female subject itself. Of course, in the process of investigating these issues I will have to look into the positions and conventions of male-centric artistic production in Sri Lanka as well. By the term 'artist' here I mean mostly painters and to a lesser extent sculptors.

A further clarification of my analytical interests and an expansion of the two issues I have identified leads to my interest also in issues of agency of these women artists. More clearly, I am interested in their agency in constructing and perpetuating certain representations of the female figure and subject and their ability or failure to transform the manner in which that subject has been constructed and reproduced in Sri Lankan art for a considerable period of time. I am also concerned here with the ways in which notions of femininity and particularly what 'kind of femininity' can be, and has been represented, as art in Sri Lanka, and the manner in which such established dominant images of the past have continued.

In Search of a Lineage

It seems reasonable to initiate this analysis by interrogating the manner in which the female figure has generally been represented in Sri Lankan art, whether by male or female artists, and also to ascertain its historical continuity. The best-known female figures from ancient Sri Lankan paintings come from the images in the 5th century specially prepared rock fortress of Sigiriya where a series of female torsos were painted by an unknown artist or artists on a specially prepared rock face, perhaps for the sensual pleasures of King Kasyapa and the members of his royal court. In general archaeological reckoning Kasyapa is credited with turning Sigiriya, previously a mere regional settlement and military outpost, into a fortress as well as a pleasure garden. The Sigiriya frescoes also represent some of the very few painted images

of women not constructed within a religious idiom. They are clearly represented in an extremely sensuous and erotic manner. They are figures to be gazed at, figures at whose beauty men are supposed to be amazed, and even fall in love with. In fact, after Sigiriya went into disuse, generations of visitors have written hundreds of graffiti over hundreds of years, among other things commenting on the beauty and sensuousness of the women of Sigiriya.

The other major sources of female figures in ancient Sri Lankan art are the remnants of temple paintings which are clearly set within a religious paradigm. The earliest remaining paintings date from the Kandyan period. They are presented in a relatively passive idiom—offering flowers, being offered as alms by Vessantara to an old Brahman, wives of Bodhisattvas, etc. This passivity and apparent lack of agency is yet another dominant image of the female that also confronts us in more recent Sri Lankan art. However, by making these observations I do not intend to argue for a clear and unilineal case of continuity in the manner in which female subject has been represented in Sri Lankan art. But I do want to make the point that when this issue is discussed, we cannot completely ignore the presence of the past in the present. Surely, such images must make up a part of our collective memory and consciousness, particularly due to the invasions post-colonial archaeology and historiography have made into our minds and imagination, through socialization, media, and school curricula.

However, it was not Kasyapa's unknown 5th century painters nor the post-Kandyan period temple painters who assured the continuity into the present of the twin images I have referred to above. That was part and parcel of a truly modernist project—the avant garde intervention of the 43 Group. The 43 Group (initiated in 1943) were a group of city-based, upper and middle-class male artists (mostly painters) from different ethnic and religious backgrounds, who managed to change the direction of Sri Lankan art. They consisted of painters such as Justin Deraniyagala, Ivan Peries, Aubrey Collette, George Keyt, L.T.P. Manjusri and others. All of them were in different ways exposed to the influences and dynamics of European art of their time, particularly visible in the cubist and expressionist images they introduced into Sri Lankan art. Their work also created a new genre of much more free and relaxed forms of artistic expression as opposed to the tighter and more academic art represented by such individuals as A.C.G.S Amarasekera.

As a collectivity of influential artists, the 43 Group also made a major impact on the manner in which they represented the female figure in their paintings, which I would suggest continues to date. In many of their works, the female figure was represented as a slim, sensuous, passive and sometimes erotic image. This particular

construct of the female was not only influenced by memories of Sigiriya, but was also inspired by mythic narratives from Hinduism and epics such as *Mahabharata*. Among others, George Keyt's female figures most clearly represent this trend (Dharmasiri 1988: 20-35; Goonasekere 1991). The fact that Keyt was the most influential Sri Lankan artist of this century must also be borne in mind here. As far as Keyt's work is concerned, his female figures went far beyond the mere sensuous to traverse a rather elaborate realm of the erotic. Moreover, this kind of representation of the female body in his work was consistent from the 1920s to his death in the early 1990s.

Comparatively, Ivan Peries, another well-known artist of the 43 Group, was not as obsessed with the kind of paradigmatic representation of the female body so closely associated with Keyt (Bandaranayake and Fonseka 1996). But whenever he did paint women, particularly in the 1940s and up to the early 1960s, they were also close to nature, bathing in rivers, apparently carefree, slim etc. In addition, as I have already noted, these artists were exposed to contemporary dynamics of European art and were familiar with the dominant themes of modernism in general. This assured that the prevailing European attitudes towards the representation of the female figure in art as a modernist preoccupation had also become part of their own imagination. Thus the ability to master the female figure, particularly the female nude or semi-nude was important to the artists of the 43 Group and those that followed them.

Sexual objectification was especially evident among early modernist artists. The best-known works which represent this trend are Gauguin's 'primitives', Matisse's nudes, and Manet's and Picasso's prostitutes (Perera 1997). Moreover, Chadwick notes that the kind of works referred to above, which are closely associated with the development of modern art, "wrest their formal and stylistic innovations from an erotically based assault on female form" (Chadwick 1996: 279). Moreover, Chadwick further argues that modern artists from Renoir to Picasso have contributed towards merging the sexual and artistic by realms by equating "artistic creation with male sexual energy, presenting women as powerless and sexually subjugated" (Chadwick 1996: 279 - 80). Similarly, Carol Duncan, talking about sexualizing of creativity by the German Expressionists and Cubists, argues that in much of such work the female figure is reduced to flesh and rendered powerless before the artist or viewer where her body is "contorted according to the dictates of his erotic will" (Quoted in Chadwick 1996: 280). In the Sri Lankan context, it is perhaps Keyt who most completely imitated these trends and played a significant role in institutionalizing them within Sri Lankan art in an influential manner.

Another important aspect of this particular type of representation has to be understood and located in the context of the Sri Lankan independence movement, which in itself was also a predominantly urban-based middle-class movement, particularly with regard to its leaders. As a matter of fact, the painters of the 43 Group and

the leaders of the independence movement came from the same elite social backgrounds. I would argue that in the context of this independence movement and its euphoria, there was also a need to create a certain kind of ideal Sri Lankan (Ceylonese at that time) cultural identity, particularly in painting, drama, literature and so on. The relative renaissance in these fields in the post-1940s period (which lasted until the 1960s) is a result of this interest. Part of this identity creation was based on reinventing the past, and its idealization and glorification of what was perceived as rural and pure as opposed to the urban and impure.

In so far as painting was concerned, this need to create an ideal Sri Lankan identity or image was apparent. The village, its alleged harmony and its perceivably beautiful women all became part of this conscious political and cultural project. It is, however, important to note that this was mostly an idealization of the Sinhala village. It is no accident that despite the varied ethno-religious backgrounds of its members, there were no Tamils or Muslims in the 43 Group. Interestingly, the members of this group, even though far removed from the realities of the Sinhala village and its women, essentially created this kind of ideal female subject based on their specific exposure to norms of European art at the time, along with their almost total lack of everyday experience with the kind of imagery they were producing on canvas.

What I am suggesting is that this essentially male-initiated representation of the female subject is what is dominant in the images of female figures even in contemporary art, as typified by the syrupy representations of village 'beauty' and passive sensuousness of women in the work of Senaka Senanayake. But this is not something restricted merely to contemporary male artists such as Senanayake, but also extends to the work of well-known women painters. If we take as examples, the current work of Iromi Wijewardena and Marie Alles Fernando, it is this idealized image of the female handed down to us by the 43 Group that stare at us from their canvases with an ever-present smile: dancers, water carriers, market women, bathing women etc. In the female images of these two senior women painters, there is no pain, no ugliness, or even the messiness that is so typical of human life everywhere. These are quite simply images of sensuous women, if not erotic, still betraying no sense of agency but merely there to please the eye and satisfy the desires of those who gaze, most often men—the very creators of this particular type of imagery.

Passive Mothers and Erotic Women

At this point it is perhaps necessary to pose the question as to why the kind of images I have outlined earlier in this paper seem to predominate or rather perpetuate in Sri Lankan art. That question needs to be posed together with the following question: Why is there a lack of agency in these women painters and in what they paint? One could partially answer the first of these questions by framing it within a Freudian psychoanalytic theory or feminist critiques. But such general explanations are inadequate to probe into issues of representation and their politics

in specific socio-cultural sites which have their own dynamics and politics.

However, even socio-culturally speaking, these are not issues restricted merely to Sri Lankan art. In talking about late 19th century and early 20th century art in Europe and Germany in particular, Anoli Perera argues that the kind of mastery of the female nude referred to earlier, was extremely important in the process of establishing one's artistic identity. In this context she suggests that women artists were confronted with the problem of reconciling their own identities, first as artists and then as women (Perera 1997).

The other problem that one has to deal with here is the very stark reality that, except for a handful of well-known women artists based in Colombo, there is no community of women artists in Sri Lanka. I suggest this is due to the patriarchal system these women still live in and their lack of support networks and institutions. Talking about the emergence of the feminist art movement in the United Kingdom, Parker and Pollock argue that the women's art movement emerged in the 1970s out of the dynamic women's movement that was making its presence felt since the 1960s and have remained closely aligned to this date (1987: 3). This period also marked the attempts made by women's art groups in the United Kingdom to hold group exhibitions of women artists in venues that were then not recognized as legitimate exhibition spaces, allowing women the space to do the kind of work they wanted and exhibit without being held back by prevailing patriarchal social values and restrictions (Ibid: 3-5, 15-19). A similarly dynamic feminist art movement also emerged in North and Central America, Australia and elsewhere which were simultaneously protest groups as well as artists groups (Ibid: 3-4, 15-19; Chadwick 1996: 355-77).

Comparatively, these kinds of developments have not taken place in Sri Lankan art. Part of the problem is that the kind of dynamic women's movements in Euro-America did not emerge in Sri Lanka. In fact, such a movement still does not exist. What exists in Sri Lanka are a number of feminists and some movements they represent which have relative visibility in selected social realms in the cities. As a collective, however, they do not have the dynamism, the roots, vision nor the direction the movements briefly referred to above clearly had. The point then is that one cannot expect a feminist or women's art movement to emerge from such a disparate amalgamation of individuals and organizations which lack influence, intellectual coherence, and reach. In a situation where no Sri Lankan feminist or women's group has regular access to mass-circulating Sinhala or Tamil newspapers to engage in general debate or questioning, the kind of sustained interrogation of the manner in which the female figure is consistently represented in art, the position of women artists in Sri Lanka, or any other related issues, cannot be undertaken.

In addition to the lack of support networks, women artists in Sri Lanka also have to face serious socio-cultural hurdles that clearly disrupt their process of maturing as artists and as thinkers within the art circles. In fact, there are only a very few full-time women

artists (clearly less than about 7 or so) holding regular exhibitions who have some kind of national recognition. Thus in sheer numbers alone they are a clear minority, which also makes it extremely difficult to challenge the kind of traditions and conventions I have been discussing. It must be noted here that this situation exists despite the fact the majority of students who are taking courses in painting and sculpture at the Institute of Aesthetic Studies in Colombo are women. We also know that the large majority of them 'successfully' graduate from the institute with degrees in fine art. Then, once they step into the wider society, they literally seem to disappear.

I would suggest that they disappear within strictly enforced gender roles, among which the sexual scripts governing the responsibilities of motherhood and wifehood predominate. In other words, their individual professional identity as women artists, which would hardly have developed at the time of their graduation, does not get any space or impetus to expand within marriage and motherhood. In addition, male or female artists—whether painters or sculptors—are hardly recognized as being in a separate, independent, and above all 'respectable profession' unless they have achieved a standard of relative fame within the minute Colombo-based art market. It is generally perceived as acceptable for them to become art teachers in schools because that particular vocation is framed within the idiom of a 'teacher' and not as an 'artist.' Artists are also popularly perceived as a marginal community: not affluent, but strange and in general not ideal citizens. Given the fact that women are perceived to be the ideal socializers of society, it is unlikely that they as mothers and wives would be encouraged to be associated with lifestyles or professions popularly seen as not ideal. On the other hand, even if they attempt to continue their profession within the realms of marriage and motherhood, domestic responsibilities usually do not allow them to spend adequate time on artistic endeavors required to mature as artists, both technically and intellectually. This situation is most clearly manifested within families where both husband and wife have had a training in art. Even if the husband, who may be the inferior artist, gains prominence, his wife recedes into the background of the kitchen and is heard of no more.

The few women who have relatively succeeded as artists have done so mostly due to two reasons. First, they have had the ability to hire domestic help and have managed to invest the resultant saving of time on painting and sculpting. Secondly, they have also had access to some independent wealth, which meant that they did not have to go looking for employment as teachers, office workers, and so on, for the sake of survival. Linked to these two issues is yet another reality which is the access these women had to an urban-based network of influence which helped them in securing sponsorship, publicity, and ultimately a market as well. In this sense, the few successful women artists are also marked by a clear urban and middle/upper-class background.

Conclusion: Can the Enduring Images of the Female Figure in Sri Lankan Art Be Challenged or Transformed?

At this point we need to pose the question whether the limited contributions of these women have impacted upon the art scene in a decisive manner. We would have to answer that question with a clear "no." That is, in numbers or in artistic or intellectual production and intervention, they do not constitute a force that has or could make a difference. This will continue to be the case if existing structural restrictions continue to be in place. As I stated in the beginning, as far as women artists' representation of the female figure is concerned, the great majority of those who are visible in the contemporary art scene have simply perpetuated particular male-constructed representation and in no way challenged its epistemological origins. But despite the general absence of agency in the work of women artists, and despite the absence of support networks and ideological sustenance, it seems to me that three women artists have in recent times at least begun to challenge the sensuous and passive representation of the female figure. They are Druvinka Madawala, Anoli Perera, and Nilanthi Weerasekera.

In a recent review of Druvinka's paintings exhibited at the Heritage Art Gallery in Colombo (September 1997), Anoli Perera offers a specific reading in which she argues that Druvinka's feminine positionality plays an important role in her current work—but not in line with the established dominant patriarchal art tradition: Druvinka uses wombs as a site of symbolic protection from the chaos of the outside world, the chaos created by the patriarchal world order (1997b: 14). The artist's marginalization as a woman and victim gives her adequate validity and emotional impetus to identify with the refugees, who because of violence that was unleashed against them have become victimized, and therefore a spectacle. Hence, her desire to activate such a strategy of concealment from the scrutinizing gaze (Ibid). Thus Anoli Perera argues, in the context of Druvinka's work, that aspects of female sexuality can be represented in art without framing them within idioms of sensuousness, eroticism or passivity, which are presently dominant themes in the way the female figure is currently represented in Sri Lankan art.

In her own work Anoli Perera also has attempted to challenge this image and deconstruct it in a conscious manner. Even though her early work also betrayed a preoccupation with painting women in a sensuous idiom, she has in recent times moved away from such representations. This departure was most visible in her exhibition "Vehicle Named Woman" at the Heritage Art Gallery in February 1998. This work which constituted a series of steel sculptures, an installation using car tyres symbolic of the vagina among other things, and five separate art works using car parts such as doors and bonnets (which verge between paintings, sculptures and installations) sought to capture the harshness and the sense of bondage that mark the life of not simply women artists but women in general in Sri Lanka and elsewhere. Her works here were harsh,

rugged, violent and even unpleasant. She argued that she had consciously attempted to work on an aesthetic epistemology that draws from semiotics and concepts of gender, while trying to emphasize formal or decorative values secondarily, giving precedence to ideas (Perera 1998). For Perera, there are clear correlations between the manner in which the car is utilized and perceived in society and the way in which the female image is viewed and constructed: the car is a sign of masculinity and power. It is also a man's fetish that is appropriated and controlled for his pleasure and thus becomes an erotic object. The car thus becomes analogous to the objectification of woman which is perpetuated by the media, in advertising etc (Ibid).

The other woman artist who has made a concerted attempt to initiate a rupture in the manner in which women are generally represented, not only in Sri Lankan art but also in the Sri Lankan imagination, is Nilanthi Weerasekera. Like in the recent work of Anoli Perera dealing with issues of sexuality and female identity, Nilanthi Weerasekera's work is not formulated within a paradigm of sensuousness or passivity, eroticism or beauty. In fact, those representations of the female have been consciously obliterated with layers of images appropriated from aspects of the material culture which in the perception of Weerasekera contributes to the process of constructing the woman in Sri Lanka. In her work there is no order, only chaos. Moreover, her exhibition was a clearly formulated political intervention (Weerasekera 1997). But the opposition to the politics it represents was immediate and predictable:

We see in her paintings various female figures constituting of images of pieces of cloth, hems, stitches, strings, lines of buttons, advertising models etc. Nilanthi does not present such female subject matter as mere reportage, but in a way that initiates feelings of eroticism and sex appeal in those who view the paintings. Even though her paintings do not present nudes, love scenes or other sensuous visual representations, the woman's eroticism is presented very clearly on the canvas—But feminist art critics who would not see any of these things would surely describe her work in the following fashion: You have arrived to destroy the fortress of male-centric field of painting and its male hegemony. Because there are no female painters, the field of painting has become a vulgar male-centric field... (Ilayappaarchchi 1997).

Besides being naively male chauvinistic, perhaps without actually knowing it, and rabidly anti-feminist, Ilayappaarchchi, a self-appointed art critic in the Sinhala medium, also betrays a severe malnutrition in contemporary knowledge in visual art theory and models of evaluation, as well as complete unfamiliarity with contemporary social and feminist theory. He sees eroticism and sensuousness in a situation where such attributes have been effectively wiped out as part of a particular artistic and political intervention. In his fear of both feminism and the kind of challenge women artists could possibly pose, he has preferred to see

something in an exhibition where what he wants to see is completely absent. I would suggest that these comments epitomize the kind of opposition progressive women artists will have to encounter if they dare transcend established conventions. Such opposition may in fact come from some of the established women artists themselves who also lack the kind of intellectual depth to challenge these notions. In fact, I would argue that Weerasekera's intervention is more important at a rhetorical level, rather than an intellectual one. Her presentation did not have the theoretical and reflective sophistication of Perera's exhibition referred to above. Moreover, she completely missed Ilayappaarachchi's criticism of her work and distributed the leaflet containing his comments on the opening day of her exhibition. However, her intervention nevertheless marks a significant development, particularly because it comes from an artist who is still attempting to carve out a niche for herself.

In summary, it should be clear that due to the existing patriarchal structures, lack of support networks, the absence of a dynamic women's movement and the absence of ideological support, a vibrant women's art movement, capable of challenging existing patriarchal values and the ways in which female subject is represented in Sri Lankan art, is unlikely to emerge any time soon. What one will find is the irregular emergence of individual women artists who can initiate such challenges and debates on the basis of their individual political backgrounds, commitment, financial abilities and networks. That will surely have to take place in the midst of serious opposition. So for a long time we seem destined to live with the syrupy colors and passive 'beauty' with which Masters of Sri Lankan art such as Senaka Senanayake and Mistresses of Sri Lankan art such as Iromi Wijewardena represent the female subject in a context where the female body is still mostly a site of exploitation, and an object to gaze at, and not a site of struggle for change.

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