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Mithila Painting: An Enquiry into Its Historiography and Identity

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Abstract

This paper examines how Mithila women produce contemporary arts for ceremonial occasions to reflect cultural and political history. Its archaic customs consistently highlight Hindu Sanskrit culture. The domination of Brahmin and Kayastha women from higher castes has been the central theme of Mithila painting. This tradition has been subverted, and Sahlesh (Harijan painting) has been established as a new hero. The Mithila tradition, which gained international recognition following its exposure to the Western world in the 1930s, has had a profound impact on scholarly discourse and academic inquiry. However, most historians focus on the authenticity and significance of artistic work, which has caused them to ignore the intricacies involved in painting. Mithila paintings have five distinct styles: Bharni, Tantrik, Kachni, Kohbar, and Godna. Bharni. Since there are several ways to interpret the art, a qualitative research approach is employed in this study, and it explores and analyzes the historiographical dynamics of Mithila paintings, and also attempts to demonstrate how the structure of Maithili paintings continues to stress the dominance of central tendencies within the pictorial field, even despite these changes in the painting's formal qualities. Contemporary Mithila paintings engage deeply with historical consciousness and present-day socio-cultural realities and

offer both a reflection and critique of society while challenging traditional hierarchies through emerging voices like Harijan artists.

Keywords: historiography, identity, Mithila painting, Sahlesh, tradition, Vedic culture

Mithila Painting as a Material Object

This paper establishes the framework for understanding and promoting Mithila paintings in the post-colonial era. Several academicians at the national and global levels take notes of Mithila's artistic works because of their substantial meaning in contemporary society. This exploratory and descriptive writing explains how national and regional history has been linked with the Mithila identity through paintings in the Mithila academic debate. Another idea about Mithila art has been emphasized in Orientalist discourse which is the constant nature of Mithila civilization is now going to take center stage in the discussion of Mithila art. Bhim Nath Regmi observes, "Painting is the highest form of art. It bestows righteousness (dharma), prosperity (artha), desire (kama), and liberation (moksha)" (1). The researchers explore the implications of art as a material object, inciting the cultural anthropologists to contemplate Mithila painting about societal dynamics. Rozsika Parker, and Griselda Pollock incorporate, "Art … mediates and represents social relations in schema of signs which require a receptive and preconditioned reader in order to be meaningful. And it is at the level of what those signs connote, often unconsciously, that patriarchal ideology is reproduced" (119). This fundamental approach—art makes society lively—illustrates the range of ways that art influences social connections rather than delving deeply into theoretical implications.

Art presents a broader perspective on the constituents that comprise a sequence of waves to keep groups of people together. The illustration of Elizabeth DeMarrais and John Robb in "Art makes society: an introductory visual essay" indicates, "…art can help to create a ritual setting by setting it apart, distinguishing ritual space from quotidian contexts; art may also help to set the scene through references to liturgical narratives" (7). Over time, human beings perceive art as a clue to epitomize a certain social environment and behavior. It spreads ideas about the collective behavior of people to encourage the participation of community members in an event and a ritual for sharing the experiences. Additionally, art functions as a lexicon for the customs that members of the same socio-cultural class get connected with or distance themselves from groups. Often, it shows how ancient communities, since prehistoric times, used creativity to create a variety of artistic representations to generate networks of shared identity at the local level.

Art and history are interlocking, and the artistic text depicts its historical context rather than a mimetic reflection of art. Walter Benjamin writes, "[Art] must be considered quite as much according to the totality of their afterlife and effects [*Wirkung*] as according to the history of their composition" (464). Historians were crucial in establishing a cognitive connection between events in any historical production through the use of their narratological skills. The ability of historians' materials and historiographical approach play a major role in portraying history as a cohesive story. In order to construct a coherent

and linear story, historians usually possess the capacity to select and omit historical events. However, aside from their fundamental enmity for one another, there is not much of a discrepancy between reality and fantasy, truth and error. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht observes that professional historians have to admit that historical knowledge is meaningless in practical settings. This claim states that there was aggressive antagonism to the institutional dominance that it achieved in the Western world in the nineteenth century. And it was precisely as a result of this problematization that alternate routes to the past "replaced" (411) conventional historical perspectives.

The question was about the origin of history as it is related to a specific country, group of people, and civilization. Constructing knowledge is now a driving factor for modern human beings. Transforming human society into a knowledge-based society with knowledge-dependent social positions, social groupings, social circumstances, social activities, and social interactions is historic in contemporary times. For these, the study examines the use of Mithila painting as a vessel for establishing cultural expression of local people and how it functions to historicize the Mithila tradition, encourage mutual respect, and establish communication on a global scale to increase the implication of art in articulating the identity of local people, which promotes cultural cohesion to reveal the identity of Mithila people.

Drawing on Subaltern Studies, particularly the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the framework considers how the voices and agency of rural, lower-caste, and women artists have been marginalized in dominant art historical narratives. Spivak's question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" resonates strongly with the context of Mithila artists, whose aesthetic expressions are often curated and interpreted through elite or Western lenses, potentially silencing their own epistemologies. Her assumption in "Can the Subaltern Speak" does not focus directly on paintings, but her arguments apply to the study of art. She discusses how marginalized voices –subaltern women— are portrayed within dominant discourses shaped by Hindu law, "…defined by the subject's use of memory: *sruti* (the heard), *smriti* (the remembered), *sastra* (the learned-from-another), and *vyavahara* (the performed-in-exchange)" (281). It raises questions about who gets to speak through the art, who interprets it, and whether the original cultural and gendered voices of the artists are truly being heard or overwritten. Hemangi Bhagat and Madhavi Arekar critically engage with Spivak's foundational ideas. They explore the complexities of subaltern resistance, identity, voice and agency to emphasize how power structure marginalize the voices.

Historiography of Mithila Painting

For centuries, women from the Mithila region, "The Kingdom of Mithila extended in the past from the Himalayas in the north to the Ganges on the south and between the Koshi and Gandaki rivers" (Pandey 171) – have engaged in artistic creation to assert their presence within the sociocultural landscape. Jitbahadur Rayamajhi claims, "After the destruction of the Indus civilization, the Aryans, who lived in the coastal region of the

Indus River, moved to the east. After the establishment of the Arya Vrata civilization, they became nobles and elites under the Vedic *Varnashram* system" (2). Since prehistoric times, Mithila paintings as a medium of expression have always been taken as a key aspect of delivering the shared meanings in their locality. In its historical context, the representation of society through colorful arts has produced a sense. The question of representation is divided into the circuit of society, which comprises the Mithila identity, representation of society, production of art, and its circumstances.

The painting is a visual sign that produces meanings about the world through representation. Though women from different socio-political groups were the customary painters, most of the local community members were silent about women's contribution from the socio-cultural perspective of Mithila. Rayamajhi further assimilates, "The matriarchal folk tradition was a legacy of the Indus civilization. The element of matriarchy is found in the Mithila folk art of Nepal. Mithila folk art as well as Awadhi folk culture and artistry have a preponderance of matriarchy" (2–3). However, in the contemporary era, Mithila, a Hindu society, has the impression of a patriarchal Vedic civilization and Sanskrit culture. Vijayakanta Mishra views that from the fourteenth century onwards, Mithila artists remained anonymous, making these paintings only as part of their day-to-day rituals. Arya Hindu culture is a part of the *Sanatan* folk Vedic culture of the folk art of Mithila, Bhojpuri, and Abadhi as a whole. Neel Rekha opines, "Mithila, also known as Videha or Tirhut, refers to a broader cultural region than a distinct geographic entity. However, in the present times, it includes the districts of Darbhanga, Madhubani, Bhagalpur, Saharsa, and Purnea in North Bihar and some districts in the Terai region of Nepal" (2010, 2). If we go through the history of Mithila paintings, even the customary painters were unidentified in society, and the majority of the local women members who detached themselves from this artistic creation remained silent about women's contribution.

Soma Ghosh establishes the history of the Mithila region and conjectures, "Mithila . . . land of the Janakas. Vaishali was a renowned Buddhist and Jaina centre. . . . Kapila; founder of Samkhya philosophy, Gautama Aksapada [founder of Nyaya-sastra], Jaimini, founder of the Mimamsa school. . . . the Vaidehas, the Licchavis, the Magadhans, Mauryas, Guptas, and Karnata dynasty [ruled here]" (64). The region has advanced an amazing balance between the physical and spiritual worlds that allows the pious and conventional belief to consider the ramifications of human actions in their accustomed lives. Walter Pohl's perception of "constructions of identity in medieval historiography" is concerned with "humanist writing of history to enlighten modern historiography" (1-2). The exploration of Mithila painting goes back about one hundred years. On January 15, 1934, a terrible seismic tremor tore through the Mithila region and caused heavy demolition of houses. Ghosh views ". . . a British Civil Servant [William G. Bowman, an official of the colonial government] in 1934 who went there after an earthquake" (63) and

expounded the beautiful paintings of lotus, snakes, angels, turtles, parrots, and peacocks on the walls and in the lakes.

The roots of Mithila painting date back to the ancient Sanskrit epic *Ramayana*. Mohini Gupta and Swati Gangwar observe that Mithila art is one of the many well-known art styles in this region. In keeping with centuries-old conventions, the paintings from the demolished structures portrayed Uma-Maheshwar, and other divine entities made by the women of Mithila family units, fundamentally within the Kohbar-ghar, or marriage chambers, as a portion of wedding customs. Jagdish Chavda transcribes the history of Mithila art, which begins with the story of the *Ramayana*:

> The arts were also influenced by the great hero Prince Rama of Ayodhya, who affirmed the hand of Mithila's famous Princess Sita in marriage at the durbar (court) of her philosopher-father, King Janaka . . . Such a vast and rich history of some 5000 years can never be exhausted in the narrative content these Jitwarpuri women cull for their art. (25)

The Hindu epic *Ramayana* has parallels to the Mithila paintings when King Janaka commissions his artists to produce paintings for his daughter's nuptials. It started to adorn the homes in the area as the expertise was passed down from generation to generation. The village women amalgamated their ideas, aspirations, thoughts, and natural life on the walls and canvas to represent their ritual, cultural, and historical experiences. Rekha views, "The ceremonial folk paintings of Mithila . . . dating back to very ancient times . . . constituting two very important traditions of *aripanas,* or floor drawings and wall paintings, . . . made on the occasion of marriage ceremonies. W. G. Archer succeeded in drawing the attention of the art-lovers towards this art form . . . " (2011, 1-2), and it refabricates the meaning and impact of Mithila arts.

Historiography and identity are troublesome points, in spite of the fact that they appear decently self-evident. Jan Assmann specifies that it has been amply demonstrated that profoundly specific representation of the past offers assistance to a community to set up the importance of the past and display occasions in the long run. Pohl agrees, "Historiography is our main source for reconstructing the meaning and impact of social groups of all kinds in the distant past" (5). The painting has revived the past and linked the present with the distant past. Allan Megill combines with Jorn Rusen's theory of historiography and makes a difference in creating a sense of history. He reveals, ". . . five factors: the cognitive interest of human beings in having an orientation in time; theories or leading views concerning the experiences of the past, empirical research methods, forms of representation, and the function of offering orientation to society" (39) for analyzing and commenting on present-day historiography.

The scattered remnants of ancient paintings and the entry of Western researchers into the Mithila region, as well as Pupul Jayakar's study, which is discussed in the 'Paintings of Mithila', were two substantial expansions that resulted in virtually explicit adjustments of art. At that time, a number of guests visited Mithila, including Erika

Moser, a German folklorist, Yves Vequaud, a French writer, and Raymond Lee Owens, an American anthropologist. Affected by the exhortation of these researchers' activities, they started to consolidate changes in predictable ceremonial symbolism and presented topics such as day-to-day rustic life, prevalent events, and scenes from narratives and native legends. In the late 1980s and 1990s, Japanese craftsmanship partners appeared sharply intrigued by the craftsmanship. The visit of Japanese artist Tokio Hasegawa to Mithila opened a new shape in its evolution and historiography. Along with the depiction of the biosphere and divine images, the *trishul* (trident) and bow of Rama were the new subject matter of paintings.

The non-Mithila artists were influenced by William Archer's exploration, and following the steps of spectacle inspiration, western scholars began to compare Mithila paintings with the arts of Western painters. Hélène Fleury and Damien Ehrhardt confirm, "Tokio Hasegawa . . . joined the counterculture movement in Japan as a member of the Taj Mahal Travelers, . . . fascinated by Mithila paintings. . . . In 1982, he created the Mithila Museum [in Japan], . . . The museum includes approximately 2000 Mithila artworks and has mounted numerous exhibitions in Japan" (9). This part of the writing has endeavored to survey the shifts within the historiography of Mithila painting. Archer's observation compares, "If we are to find an analogy in European art, we might say that the colors of Brahmin paintings are parallel to those in paintings by Miro while those of Kayastha paintings resemble the black and terracotta colors of Greek vases" (32). It has looked to historicize the images of Mithila painting during the colonial period in India and the Rana regime—the darkest age in Nepalese political history. Following the root recognition of Mithila artists, Mithila and non-Mithila researchers promoted it in Nepal, India, Japan, and Europe to reflect how non-Mithila researchers translated the craftsmanship of local people from outsiders' standards, and made a romanticized history of Mithila paintings.

In Mithila historiography, women have historically been marginalized, and their voices as a significant portion of human civilization are ignored and unrecorded by male authors. However, it is only reflected in rituals, tradition, folklore, etc. The portrayal of a woman as a veiled bride by an art enthusiast endorsing Mithila art has offered future researchers a ready-made resource for crafting an exotic picture of Mithila women. Western researchers studying Mithila culture have always been fascinated by images of veiled women. In the traditional setting of the Mithila region, the veiled women had inconsequential features with an almost elapsed connotation—basic constituents of a comatose symbol system. However, in the context of colonialism, the Mithila region had this effect. Women assumed the role of symbols that are deliberately employed to demonstrate loyalty to their own set of values. Later, the orientalist portrayal was reinforced by Western scholars to shape and perpetuate the image of the veiled women. Edward Said viewed the application of this mode of Oriental depiction as:

> Philosophically, then, the kind of language, thought, and vision that I have been calling Orientalism very generally is a form of radical realism; anyone employing Orientalism, which is the habit of dealing with questions, objects, qualities, and regions deemed Oriental, will designate, name, point to, or fix what he is talking or thinking about with a word or phrase, which is then considered either to have acquired, or more simply to be, reality. (72)

The historical values exhibited by women have less priority in history. Keeping the family and society in solid form can be a source of pride for those whose fame and responsibility extended in South Asia and beyond the boundaries of the planet were brought up by extremely honest women. A woman's primary responsibility is to be a good mother and a good painter in the Mithila region. Their history must be recorded to continue the civilization that has grown with enormous strides over time.

Mithila art is a part of history that demonstrates how individuals see themselves and their surroundings in paintings. Mithila people expressed their opinions to others through art historiography, which has helped them comprehend human history, society, culture, and tradition. Eva Kernbauer historicizes art and history, "'Art' and 'history': both concepts were conceived at the threshold of modernism, around 1800" (28). Understanding the lifestyles and interactions of early human beings with their surroundings has been greatly assisted by art history. Wilhelm von Humboldt accepts, "[visual art] an historical representation, like an artistic one, is an imitation of nature . . . is the recognition of the true form, the discovery of the necessary, the elimination of the accidental . . . For it is the greatest virtue of a work of art to reveal the inner truth of forms, which is hidden in their actual appearance" (61). Mithila painting is for identifying a particular art and assessing the influence of one artist on others in the historical past.

Mithila Painting and Tradition

The majority of Mithila paintings indicate humans and their relationships to the natural scenes and deities. Richard Lane cites Marxist ideas and suggests, ". . . the 'base' of material existence directly influences the 'superstructure' of art, literature, religion, law and politics" (311), which determines the existence of Mithila paintings and tradition as forms of art and finally shapes the consciousness in the form of human object (art) and establishes relations among Mithila people. Here, the existence of art and the consciousness of people incorporate the past and present milieu of human life.

Figure 1: Kobar of Mithila painted on the wall of a marriage chamber (Burkert, and Sethi)

The traditional representation of the royal court and socio-cultural assembly like weddings, Mithila paintings frequently embrace human beings men and women for unity, natural elements like the sun, the moon, and the and the snake for divinity, animals like *the airavat* (elephant), *sher* (lion) for power, fish, and peacocks for love, plants like *tulsi, lotus, and* bamboo for fertility, and trees like *peepals for* longevity of life. Rekha states, "The arrival of westerners in Mithila [region] . . . contributed in their own way towards the revival and popularization of the folk art form, the most significant academic contribution came from Vequaud . . . and the interpretations of symbols using alien hermeneutics" (2011, 9). Applying an experience with history—a history that is the foundation of the present—is the goal of historical materialism. With a view to the present, it seeks to break the continuity of history. In this sense, Walter Benjamin portrays, "Historicism presents the eternal image of the past, whereas historical materialism presents a given experience with the past—an experience that is unique. . . . The immense forces bound up in historicism's 'Once upon a time' are liberated in this experience" (29). It holds that knowledge from the past is a living, breathing continuation of what has already been understood.

There is never any absolute space in these paintings, and all the spaces are colored with depictions of human beings, animals, birds, trees, flowers, and even geometric patterns. A few of the most broadly circulated convictions around this craftsmanship can be traced straightforwardly to Archer's 1949 article. He was more concerned with collecting examples than finding the canvases in their verifiable and social milieu. Besides, his examination was based exclusively on the information given by upper caste male sources. This patriarchal setting in which he conducted his observation and marked to construct knowledge about the portrayal of Mithila convention was deciphered and could not be linked with the painting, production, representation, and identity of the real artists.

The rigid patriarchal hierarchy and structure of the Mithila people frequently require women to wear *purdah* (literally curtains) who are involved in paintings and creating multiple symbols. The modern setting of the Hindu caste system significantly impacted the elucidations in Mithila paintings. The ethnographic tradition of Brahmin and Kayastha influenced Mithila works of art as they were in terms of their caste affiliations. William Archer wrote, "It is true that Rajputs, Sonars, Ahirs, and Dusadhs also do painting. . . . But in these latter cases, the styles are more fragmentary, and it is likely that the custom of painting developed later—the Maithil Brahmins and Maithil Kayasths setting the fashion and isolated households of other castes following their example" (25). In the same background, Claire Burkert and Cristin McKnight Sethi identify that both upper-class and lower-class, paint powerful geometric and floral patterns to border windows and doorways of their homes, along with pictures of lucky animals like peacocks, elephants, tigers, birds, and fish. Spivak assumes instead of being silence "[the subaltern women] refuses" (285), and the Mithila women from *dalit* communities like Chamar and Dusadh have developed their artistic style to protest the social hierarchy. It has portrayed another area of how the historiography started by the artists within the colonial setting affected the way this portrayal of convention is understood today.

The concept of the subaltern, presented by Antonio Gramsci and later applied to the South Asian context by Ranjit Guha, plays a role in history, sociology, and literature. Spivak's impact in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" highlights women's resistance and historical narratives in South Asia. Bhagwat and Arekar perceive, "The term [subaltern] is used as a reference to the colonised South Asian sub-continent and encompasses an area in the study of culture, history, human geography, sociology, anthropology and literature" (38). The impact of modern Western paintings has some sort of resemblance to Mithila paintings. Mithila art has five distinctive styles: Bharni, Tantrik, Kachni, Kohbar, and Godna. Bharni—use of bright and vibrant colors; Kachni—depicting mainly animals, flora, and fauna; and Kohbar—portraying Hindu wedding ceremonies. Panaches are primarily produced by Brahmin and Kayastha women concentrate on sacred themes and representations of Hindu gods and goddesses. The women could illustrate the paintings from mythical images of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. A bride and groom spend their first night together in a Mithila bridal chamber, which is painted in the Kohbar style, i.e. *puren*. The most common images are of lines painted in black and red ink and circular patterns composed of female faces. The lower classes of women especially practiced Godna and Tantrik and incorporated constituents from their daily lives.

Figure 2**:** Raja Sahlesh (https://in.pinterest.com/pin/godna-raja-shailesh--32017847345727095/)

This painting distinct in color combines many symbols from everyday routines and rituals and local culture, such as the narrative of King Sahlesh. Harinarayana Thakur depicts that Sahlesh, a folk hero of the Dusadh, the untouchable caste in Mithila, considers him a hero, shrines beneath *pipal* trees, and symbolizes the protagonist. The downtrodden classes expressed interest in painting legendary figures, while the upper castes began producing Godna as well. They were freed from the rigid constraints of their limited art forms, and as a result, the Mithila painting became a potent tool for splintering caste divisions—at least among the artists—and no one can now determine an artist's caste based alone on their works. The idea of Spivak " . . . the role of ideology in reproducing the social relations of production . . . " (275) echoes with the Sahlesh identity. In line with the ideas of Spivak, we can conclude, she writes, "To investigate, discover and establish a subaltern or peasant consciousness seems at first to be a positivistic project- a project which assumes that if properly prosecuted, it will lead to firm ground, to something that can be disclosed. This is all the more significant in the case of recovering a consciousness" (278). She uses deconstruction to render how dominant political, economic, cultural, and educational systems have marginalized subaltern (Dusadh) community of Mithila. We can encourage readers to question authority to preserve their skills and enable the transformation of seemingly impossible condition.

The continuation of Hindu rule in Mithila's domestic arts facilitated highlighting that the conventional elite castes of Mithila had preserved their blood purity and engaged in Aryan identity and inheritance. The rationalization for the continuation of the Hindu system tended to downplay the historical fact that Brahmins, *Pandits,* and Muslim kings had often interacted. Though the females were ignored in traditional society, the advancement of their ritual practices to the level of art gave the female artists social

standing and dignity. They had a decent opportunity to make a huge deal and gain fame outside of their community. Rekha perceived, "Most of the regional elite hailing from the upper castes welcomed this interpretation as it enhanced their self-esteem. An upper caste tradition could be easily equated with regional, Aryan-Hindu tradition and could be linked to the glorious past of Mithila" (2010, 11). In an attempt to raise Mithila art to the category of high *kulin* (elite) and cultural art, a new discourse about the elite caste ties has emerged there.

With the beginning of *dalit* paintings, the history of Mithila art took a divergent turn, with the help of certain intellectual artists, a contending religion with mythologies of their gods and iconographic portrayals emerged early in the first phase of the evolution of Mithila art. This stage articulated a clear modification in the Mithila artists' techniques as they suddenly began speaking for themselves and explaining the significance of their works within local discourse of Mithila cultural tradition. The Harijan art (*dalit* painting) has highlighted that the disadvantaged Mithila communities have come to center stage. Mulk Raj Ananda claims Harijan paintings reflect the dynamics of "expressionist and passionate" (18). The early history of Mithila arts made relatively little reference to the painting heritage of the lowest castes. Archer has described the paintings created by members of the lower castes, such as the Dusadhs and Ahir people, who made the horse plate in their artwork.

Following the establishment of democracy in 1951 in Nepal and after India's independence in 1947, the ideas in Mithila painting dominated both countries and molded the new strategies to bring these cultures to prominence. Pupul Jayaka states, "A few specimens of this school had been discovered earlier, elongated horses and elephants in black, stark paintings on mud walls, with no symbols or figurative drawing surrounding the main form" (108). At present, Mithila folk art captures the essence of community culture and tradition has become well-known worldwide. As Shearer West sums up on constructing folk art, Mithila art "involves a range of utilitarian and media, including cloth, paper, wood, . . . , clay, and more" (440). Common aesthetics and communal ideals are transmitted through folk art, and these transmissions in turn express socio-cultural traits.

Identity Formation in Mithila Paintings

Mithila arts emphasize the roles and perspectives of women to explain the context of the surrounding areas. This necessitates the beginning of communication between experts, promoters, and researchers. A few scholars have started the process of challenging the preexisting paradigms and tracing the formal and local origins of the portrayal norm. *Dalit* women have made a new start in this area, but there are still many examples of Mithila workmanship that need to be addressed. An optimistic quote from a scholar who has done extensive research on upper-caste women craftspeople concludes this piece. Over the past thirty years, there has been a substantial shift in society and the cultural anthropologists have observed the painting from a contemporary Western perspective.

Now, art is historically perceived as a high culture to engage with through individual and traditional expression to meet social standards. For the most part, arts and images as objects are analyzed to be viewed and displayed in galleries, museums, and other public spaces. Arts taken as symbolic representations of meanings and values are examined in the academic field to interpret a communicative performance conveyed through traditional emblematic patterns. Ellen Dissanayake, in this sense, articulates his ideas concisely:

> Regarding art as a behavior—an instance of 'making special' —shifts the emphasis from the modernist's view of art as object or quality or the postmodernist's view of it as text or commodity to the *activity* itself (the making or doing and appreciating), which is what it is in many pre-modern societies where the object is essentially an occasion for or an accoutrement to ceremonial participation . . . (223)

The aforementioned shift in perspective is connected to anthropological understandings of art. Anthropologists are thoughtful about imposing a high culture and aesthetic definition of art on the Mithila people. As Arjun Appadurai stated, the meaning of an object is determined not by its inherent characteristics but by its cultural context and historical background. Archer states that the Mithila region is located on plain land, and this place interprets the underutilized reveal as a joyful representation of its Vedic social heritage. Mithila region promotes Aryan culture to preserve its purity, and some people from lower castes create the images of King Sahlesh along with Harijana paintings. Faeza Al-Thamari, Zahra Al-Zadjali, and Badar Al-Mamari concretize, "[The] artists produce different artistic products at various multicultural environments on the basis of cultural background … and identity" (159). In ritual tradition, the artists' virtuosity and the beauty of their paintings have emotional impacts to historicize the aesthetic value in human civilizations.

Folk paintings are created in the Mithila region during festival eves and important occasions like *gauripujana*, *kojagratabrata*, *satya narayanpuja*, *ekadashi*, *deepawali*, and *chhata*. Women paint *Aripana*, a Mithila art in the geometric shape of a *mandala*, on the floor in front of the house, which represents the mystical and symbolic patterns of the universe. Kamal Prasad Srivastava states that artistic delight, religious conviction, and ritual ceremonies depict primitive tribal society as the pragmatic dynamism of the arts. They emphasize the interconnectedness of the human self and the ecological system as a continuous cultural heritage of the Mithila region. DeMarrais and John Robb state about the pragmatic function of art, "It involves a sequence of gestures that may draw groups of people together. In this way, art may constitute a group of participants, involve them in making it or using it in rituals and other ways" (6). The artistic visual images are entwined with the way of life and culture of the Mithila community maintains a balance between the secular components and the spiritual ecology of the universe.

Writings by Jyotindra Jain popularized the Harijan style. Through his efforts, oral histories were published in academic periodicals for the first time, and he began to narrate the story of Sahlesh. Uttam Paswan's explanation has covered the socioeconomic background of Chamars and Dusadhs and the differences and similarities between Brahmin

and Kayastha styles. The *dalit* themes, drawing influence from oral versions of his classical material, have shifted in light of the *dalit* movement in Nepal and India in the twenty-first century. The Madhesi and Mithila *dalit* communities now have greater power as a result of the 2006 political unrest in Nepal and the ratification of a new constitution. As such, David Szanton and Malini Bakshi identify, "Elaborating and celebrating their epic and epic hero as worthy counterparts to the upper castes' *Ramayana* and Rama may be marking the Dusadh's growing self-confidence and an assertion of a new-found community pride" (65). Academicians have provided contextual studies of Sahlesh to establish a fresh perspective on Harijan art. The rising consciousness of Madhubani discourses and the modern politics of *dalit* movement has projected the deliberate *dalit* heroes into the mythical frameworks of Mithila, which has subverted the traditional Brahmanical interpretations of Hindu society. The projection of Sahhesh imagery as a symbol of *dalit* awareness and identity has brought a new parallel history to Mithila has not focused on the epics of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharta*.

The Mithila region consistently boasted of its social superiority and saw itself as distinct from the traditional view point. In the past, this place revealed the joyful representation of its Vedic social heritage, which became essential elements of contemporary projection, and remnants of this ancient skill were relegated to the distant past. Now, Mithila has projected new local, national, and global values to link the culture with the outer world. These days, women from the Chamar and Dusadh castes carry the new themes and paint the images of other contemporary themes such as environmental pollution, women's rights, social action, and national and international events. There is a contention between Mithila's portrayal and the folk art, which raises some concerns about Mithila's artistic craftsmanship.

Conclusion

For centuries, women of the Mithila region have engaged in artistic practices and employed formal and pictorial expression to navigate and claim their place in the social structure. Mithila arts enable a nuanced examination of how the paintings function as cultural texts that retell the history and construct social identity. Every art is a way of understanding the society through the images which are deeply entangled with questions of power, representation and identity. Art is deeply woven into everyday life and plays a crucial role in ceremonial, cultural, and traditional events. No single interpretation can fully capture the vast ways the art establishes, preserves, and alters social bonds. Mithila art shares the core worldview, and human society is supported by art to uphold social capital. It empowers local women to communicate and express moral values, and deals with the performance of identities and establishes social interactions in society. It is argued that the literary work depicts its historical context rather than merely imitating it. The historical perspective focuses more on how the work has been interpreted over time than on analyzing a specific text. Contemporary Mithila art addresses current socio-cultural issues. The spiritual ecological lifestyles, cultural ceremonies, and activities of the Mithila people

are depicted in the artistic works. The paintings explore society's social interactions, cultural practices, and spiritual issues. Besides portraying the environment, the compositions respond to the current situation of the Mithila region, and the emerging trend of Harijan art challenges traditional art. The artistic space confronts social injustices and depicts society as it is. The artistic space confronts social injustices and depicts society as it is. These paintings offer an in-depth, descriptive analysis of the art and create a connection between the artist, their environment, and the creation of art, representation, and people's experiences.

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