

Review Article

Mithila Painting: An expression of eco-consciousness

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Abstract

This paper reads the eco-consciousness in visual social semiotics of Mithila Painting. The visual as the lively example of social semiotics is a great form of traditional and contemporary art. Along with the changes in the perspectives of the people, the traditional religion and myth dominated paradigm of Mithila Painting has shifted from mytho-cultural to politico-environmental issues. It has become influential way of making people aware of the contemporary issues. This shift in its traditional aesthetics has contributed to the awareness of the people about the environment, politics, female subjectivity etc. The legacy of Mithila painting is based on the idea of fertility, life cycle and the nature. There is the remarkable use of the natural motifs in the Mithila works of art, which are the essential part of entire ecology, environment and ecosystem. The relation between human and nature is the common theme of Mithila Painting since then to now. This consciousness about the environment, ecology and ecosystem has explicitly come into practice in the contemporary time though it was in dormant stage in the traditional forms. The use of the bamboo, lotus, natural colors, animals, pond all signifies the eco-conscious aspect of Mithila Painting.

Keywords: Semiotics, Mithila Painting, Eco-consciousness, Aripa, Kohbar

1.0 Introduction

The research delves into *Mithila Painting*, focusing on their role within the Maithili region spanning Nepal and India. This art form serves as a cultural lens through which the Maithili community interprets and navigates societal values, behaviors, traditions and nature. Deeply rooted in Hindu ideologies, these paintings encapsulate reflections on identity, social structures, and spirituality. Mithila Painting which is also recognized as Madhubani Art has been an age-revered tradition in the Mithila region of Nepal and India. As it is originally based on the Hindu religious myth of Ram-Janaki marriage, it is supposed to have started with the paintings of the prince of ancient Ayodhya, Ram and the ancient Mithila Princess, Sita. As Hiroshi mentions: "Mithila is the name of a region bestraddling the northern part of the state of Bihar in India and southeastern Nepal; it is bordered on the south by the Ganges (Ganga River), in the west by the Gandaki River, in the east by the Koshi River and in the north by the Churia (Siwalik) range of hills in southern Nepal" (Ishii, 1993). Despite the spatial- temporal variances, Mithila Painting has common themes of conjugal happiness, good luck, and fertility in the traditional form of paintings. They go beyond aesthetics, functioning as a tool to construct ideas of agency, visual identity, and individual subjectivity and public awareness.

They also highlight the societal restrictions placed on women, such as limitations on mobility, expression, and autonomy. For many Maithili women, this art form has evolved into a powerful medium for self-expression, challenging traditional roles and exploring new narratives as opportunities for education and mobility expand. Mithila paintings often carry layered meanings, inviting interpretation and reflection. Far from being mere decoration, they

are imbued with significance that requires careful analysis to uncover. These artworks embody both continuity and change, offering a profound commentary on the lives and aspirations of the Maithili people.

Along with the passage of time, commercialization, increasing awareness of the people, it has become more subjective, wide and interdisciplinary. Now, Mithila Painting is not only limited to the women's business and to the traditional purpose but its range is wide from ancient to present, women to men, religion to social life, aesthetics to commerce. It has survived and widened due to its dynamic pace with the flow of time. Nowadays, there are various paintings carrying the issues of the day like environment, ecology and ecosystem. As it has contributed to the social movements and awareness, people have interpreted Mithila Painting works with the new perspectives.

One of the new perspectives that Mithila painting deserves is the environmental or ecological motifs that have a great role in the smooth running of the whole ecosystem. The use of natural living and non-living things is what makes it eco-friendly, since they all are overtly or covertly the components of ecosystem. The ecology and environment are finally to run the life-cycle of the creatures and plants on this earth. As the beings and things are repeatedly used as the part of Mithila Painting, they signify the importance of the ecological elements which are the stakeholders of ecosystem of the earth. In Kohbar and Aripa, the two famous forms of Mithila Painting, the inclusion of the leaves, ponds, fish, lotus, and bamboo are always maintained. Specially, Kohbar is painted on the occasion of weddings. The decoration of wedding chamber is called Kohbar. There, too, the natural things and plants are painted on the wall symbolizing different aspects and meanings.

2.0 Literature Review

The social semiotics is more powerful than linguistic signs. In this connection, Robert and Gunther opine: "Social semiotics would need to redefine, contexts and use" (Hodge & Kress, 1988, p.5). Here, they mean to differentiate social semiotics from the mere use of word signs. To expose the ideology carried out by a painting, one should connect it to redefine it with the socio-temporal context. As every painting is a text with a message, it wants to create or at least continue a discourse, the visual semiotics of Mithila Art also follow similar pattern. The message is oriented to the semiotic process the process by which meaning is constructed and exchanged. The message is about something which supposedly exists outside itself. It is connected to a world to which it refers to in some way, and its meaning derives from this representative or mimetic function it performs.

Visual social semiotics is a new field of study originating in 1990s and has been defined by Carey and Royce as involving "the description of semiotic resources what can be said and done with images (and other visual means of communication) and how the things people say and do with images can be interpreted (Jewitt & Oyama, 2001, p.136). It means that visual social semiotics is a branch of semiotics that primarily deals with making social / contextual meaning by using and interpreting semiotic resources. It presupposes that the world is seen through signs, meaning of sign is always in relation to social/cultural community and it provides variety of resources for making meaning. It examines how visual images convey meaning through the use of signs, symbols, and codes, linking them to ideas, emotions, and cultural values. A sign communicates meaning through its signifier (physical form, like an image or color) and signified (the concept it represents). Visual semiotics provides a framework for interpreting the nuanced meanings within visual communication. By analyzing signs, symbols, and cultural contexts, it reveals how visual media shape and reflect human understanding.

3.0 Characteristics of Mithila Painting

3.1 Feminist Outlook

A number of critics have examined *Mithila Painting* from different critical cultural approaches primarily from feminist outlook whereas the art work is replete with the ecological-environmental connections with the nature. Regarding the Mithila Painting, the visual social semiotic reading can unfold the various themes as the readers and artists so far have done. According to Carolyn Henning, Mithila Painting is primarily about women: "For centuries the women have painted certain figures and designs on the walls of their mud homes for ceremonial occasions, particularly weddings and boys' sacred thread ceremonies" (Henning, 1996, p.719). The paintings created by women are not a modern phenomenon; they have been an integral part of society for a long time. Aligning with Henning, Claire Burkert opines: "[i]t might also be interpreted as acceptable means of expression for a woman within her assigned sphere of ritual and worship" (Burket, 2008, p.7). While male painters may depict a distinct worldview, women's artwork often focuses on issues relevant to their own experiences. Women have carved out their own creative space, and their paintings possess unique characteristics that set them apart from those of men. Kabit Labh says: "The art form has always been unique in its capability of incorporating social values and cultural existence along with decoration and creativity. It stands for the voice of rural women in a patriarchal society" (Labh, 2020, p. 25). The art of painting has served as a powerful tool for capturing, preserving, and subtly resisting the prevailing forces within society.

3.2 Eco-critical Discussion

Be it the traditional or the contemporary Mithila Painting, the environmental theme or the position of the plants and animals have become dominant or dormant according to the social context of the time. In this sense, the Mithila/Madhubani artist has become an environmentalist by getting concerned about the ecology. The importance of environmental or ecological elements in human life can be pervasively seen in Mithila paintings. The art by Mahalaxmi and Shantanu (Zirnis, 2015) showing Hanuman carrying Dronagiri mountain is typically in classic style based on the narrative of Ramayan. In spite of its mythical flavor, the picture is filled with eco consciousness if we deeply read it. Hanuman flying back from the Himalayas carrying the Dronagiri Mountain that has the *Sanjivini* (medicinal herb) to revive the dying Laxman signifies the importance of the herbs, Himalaya and the mountain in terms of assisting life. Moreover, it has the ecological value. The herb (*Sanjivini*) brought by Hanuman is a part of environment and greenery of life. By depicting this epic episode, the artists seem to have been influenced by the importance and power of natural herbs. Like in other Mithila paintings, there are trees in between under which Laxman is under treatment. This means that tree is the life giver which sustains and continues the breath of life by providing oxygen. Thus, the painting suggests the importance of natural surroundings for life.

Although there are variations in Mithila painting in its form and themes, the very common of its forms are Kohbar (nuptial decoration of the room) and Aripān, which are the part of Mithila culture. Kohbar and Aripān are integral to ritualistic ceremonies within Mithila culture, serving symbolic and ceremonial purposes. Even in these paintings of auspicious, religious occasions, the theme of eco-consciousness can easily be traced through some traditionally used things. For instance, a Kohbar painting which is meant to bless a newly married couple through drawing in the nuptial chamber, relies on the central theme of love and property, surrounded by things inter-related to life and environment. A typical Kohbar painting (Kohbar painting, 2011, January 28) has an assembly of symbolic images of the lotus plant, the bamboo grove, *purain*, fishes, birds, peacocks, snakes elephant besides those

of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati. It has all the things from Sun, Moon to the earthly creatures which together run the ecosystem of life. Although the bamboo, and lotus leaves are symbolic of fertility, male female genital organs, they also mean that they are the representative things of the nature or environment. They are related to the greenery and life that every human being needs to survive.

Aripan is made on the floor before starting any religious performance to worship Hindu God and Goddess. It is basically based on Tantrism. The drawing of the Sun, God and Moon to worship the cosmic power is after all the worship of nature since the Sun and Moon are the part of life cycle of nature, ecology and environment on the earth. In an Aripan (Aripan, n.d.), there is primarily the use of Tantric philosophy. In spite of its dependency on the Hindu Tantrik Philosophy that talks about the celestial cosmic bodies and their effects on the people according to their positioning, the idea of ecology and ecological balance, environmental balance can also be interpreted. As Henning Brown says, "differently positioned persons or groups in a society may have fundamentally different viewpoints and produce different cultural construction" (Brown, 1996). On the basis of this logic, an Aripan falls well within the framework of eco-consciousness. Besides the non-living motifs in an Aripan painting which are the essential part of the entire ecosystem, there are a lot of vegetative and animal motifs signifying that Mithila art is closely related to environment, biotic and biotic beings. They represent particular, forces or qualities embodied in some aspects of creation, evolution and dissolution. On the one hand they are the symbol of fertility, procreation or the cosmic life force and regeneration, and on the other they are the inseparable part of nature and the ecosystem. In both the ways they are 'symbols of life'.

In Hindu religious practice, serpent rituals with images of 'Naga' (Cobra) are predominantly observed during the monsoon season, a time when snakes are displaced from their natural habitats due to flooding and are more likely to come into contact with human settlements. The association of snakes with rainfall is rooted in the belief that they serve as harbingers of water and act as divine agents who both confine and bestow it, symbolizing their dual role as controllers of this vital natural element. Similarly other animal motifs used in an Aripan are fish, *Garuda*, tortoise, peacock, horse, owl, butterfly, bulls, elephant, cow, swan etc. They all have the double symbolic value. Except for their religious Vedic meaning, they are also the representatives of the cosmic nature. They have been performing their contribution and role in the cycle of ecology and environment. This dominance of the animal motifs in an Aripan or Mithila art resound eco-consciousness. Like animal motifs, the vegetative motifs: Lotus, beetle leaf, *purain*, bamboo etc have their environmental value in the whole ecosystem of the earth. They are very common in every Mithila painting including the Aripan. So, a highly symbolic art form, Mithila art is replete with imagery drawn from the local flora and fauna representing the environment and surroundings.

4.0 Environmental Campaign through Contemporary Mithila Paintings

As the Mithila art is also known as Madhubani art in India and worldwide, its relation to nature or the environment can also be interpreted from the word '*Mahubani*'. Shruti Das writes in regard to the literal meaning of Madhubani that the word Madhubani means "the forest of honey" (Das, 2009). It tells that the origin of the nature of art itself originates with the sense of eco-friendliness. In the modern form of Mithila art, the artists have not only limited to the mere painting of traditional ideology and myths but also started an environmental campaign in the different works of art. They are concerned that trees are being cut down for development activities due to which ecological degradation is taking place rapidly. One of the paintings by Pradyumna Kumar, whose two dozen paintings are based on the theme of environment, shows a tiger in the lap of lively nature (Indigo Arts, n.d.). The harmonious relation and dependence of the wild animal on the nature is quite evident in this

art work. The eco-poetic concept says that all the living and non-living things of the earth live together; they need each other and maintain the balance in the ecology and nature. The tiger feeling relaxed in the lap of nature accompanied by the birds signifies the eco conscious ideology depicted in the Mithila / Madhubani painting.

From ancient to the present, Mithila, painting has been residing in the animal, vegetative and natural motifs like pond which is the representation of Mithila culture. As Coralyan V. Davis opines: "In Jabalpur surrounding villages ponds play import roles both in everyday life and on special occasions. The ponds serve a number of critical functions for the surrounding human population" (Davis, 2014, p.136). The Mithila culture resides in the agrarian, rural scenario and objects. Mithila painting has entailed the environmental ideology within it. From the traditional to the contemporary works of arts we can see the idea of other inseparable relation between the environments of life. In the contemporary art by S.C. Suman (2016) entitled 'Celebrations around the Tree of life' directly indicates the association between life and environment. In this painting, people are celebrating the marriage under the tree. Here, the tree is the symbolic of the life itself without the greenery and trees, life on the earth is scientifically impossible. It provides a solace and refreshment to the people just as one feels to be in the lap of nature. The birds sitting in the tree, people involved in the marriage seem to have charged with the power of nature. The branches of tree are actually the branches of life. It shows the need for harmonious relation of all creatures for their existence as we see the elephant, birds, and humans' cooperating each other for their happy survival. This painting refers to the environmental theme of the modern Mithila Painting.

5.0 Conclusion

To sum up, as a great form of traditional and contemporary art, Mithila Painting entails environmental consciousness both implicitly and explicitly, woven into its themes, techniques, and intentions. This art form not only celebrates the splendor of nature but also serves as a poignant reminder of humanity's responsibility to protect and cherish the environment. Through its rich visual language, Mithila Painting continues to advocate for a harmonious coexistence with the natural world. Thus, paintings reflect both societal realities and the painter's aspirations, combining a descriptive portrayal of current events. Along with the change in the women's position and perspective, their subjects of painting have also shifted to the political environmental awareness. The pleasant changes have been felt after the local artists began painting tree trunks and their leaves with coats of paints, depicting images of Hindu deities and scenes from the Ramayan such as the wedding of Lord Ram with Sita, to save the environment. So, Mithila Painting as the visual social semiotics has been becoming an influential way of raising the environmental awareness since it entails a biotic and a biotic motif for long.

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