



## Contemporary Socio-Cultural Issues in Recent Mithila Paintings



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### Abstract

This article examines how Mithila art functions as a window to Maithili values and its current innovations in the field which notes the change both in society and the canvas. Two illustrious contemporary Mithila painters, Rani Jha from India and S. C. Suman from Nepal, shows how Mithila art has swerved from traditional motifs and themes to the on-going socio-cultural and socio-political issues even as the aim of painting is commercial, that is, to earn money by making the art saleable among foreign tourists and art lovers. While Rani Jha mostly

highlights women's issues, Suman remains engaged with Nepal's volatile political situation which sometimes makes him pessimistic and sometimes optimistic. It also makes the point that Mithila painting is largely women-centred, despite the hold of patriarchy. The one, controlling, socio-semiotic meaning of Mithila art is that it is an expression of women's assertiveness and agency of their subjectivity within the *Lakshman Rekha* drawn by Maithili patriarchy. The objective of this research is to show how the geographically confined Maithili drawing happens to communicate larger issues at national and global levels at a fresh time. And to prove the main argument, this study makes use of the theoretical framework of socio-semiotic analysis. A semiotic analysis of the artwork in the light of the specific socio-cultural contexts of Mithila reveals that the art not only alerts and modifies the mindset of the stakeholders but also visualizes the socio-cultural troubles of the existing era.

**Keywords:** *S. C. Suman; Rani Jha; feminist agenda; hope; despair*

## Introduction

Of late, Maithili artists have been going beyond the traditional art-forms, traditional motifs, and conventional styles. Two considerations—the commercial (Das, 2013) and the socio-political interests—have started to inform the contemporary renditions (Das, 2013; Szanton, 2017; Thakur, 2017). Paintings from below—the low and the lower castes—have been competing with the productions from the upper-caste (Szanton, 2017; The Charticle, 2018). In Nepal, particularly, current national and regional politics have caught the attention of some of the artists. As democratization at the popular level has gained in pace, so responsiveness of Mithila art to the on-going socio-political changes and challenges has been on the rise. Among several prominent artists, Rani Jha from India and S.C. Suman from Nepal are the two exemplary painters whose works express amenability to the on-going changes and challenges on both sides of the border. While Rani Jha mostly highlights women's issues, Suman remains engaged with Nepal's volatile political situation which sometimes

makes him pessimistic and sometimes optimistic.

Moreover, due to the lack of industrialization and unemployment problem, people are desperately in a search of household industry like Mithila painting. Because of work migration of male counterparts, women have a kind of mental pressure and have to depend on themselves for the regular economic crisis. However, this has proved a boon for Mithila painting that reveals lots of hidden social problems. Individual artists observe his/her community and the local issues even happen to highlight the global ones. In this regard, Jha, Bsaies, and Zirnis (2018) assert, "Although this used to be exclusively a lower caste issue, upper castes are now experiencing the same pressures created by under or unemployment" (para. 6). The family members of migrant workers both in India and Nepal face certain social constraints that add further complications to a difficult situation. And this socio-cultural troubles somersault day by day because of unrest political turmoil. The contemporary Mithila paintings not only hover around these

burning problems of common folks but also alert the concerned people for possible solutions.

The rationale behind this research work is to visualize the current content of Mithila painting which roots itself deeply in the local community and equip as well as ornament

### **Methodology**

The analytical framework comes from socio-semiotics which re-orient mainstream semiotic analyses of sign systems towards inclusion in discourse and social change in what is called the method of social semiotics. Social semiotics embraces meaning-making as a social practice (van Leeuwen, 2005), that is to say, it studies signifying practices in specific socio-cultural circumstances. In other words, Lemke (1990) defines socio-semiotics as:

a synthesis of several modern approaches to the study of social meaning and social action. One of them, obviously is semiotics itself: the study of our social resources for communicating meanings. ... Formal semiotics is mainly interested in the systematic study of the systems of signs themselves. Social semiotics includes formal semiotics and goes on to ask how people use signs to construct the life of a community. (p. 183)

As every community is unique, the signs used by one community are likely to be unlike those used by another, for instance, in much of Asia, including South Asia, red is the traditional colour for a wedding dress (symbolizing joy and reproduction) whereas it is a mourning dress for people in Ivory

with the pragmatic concern at local and national level. The purpose of this paper is to highlight artists as agents which not only revolutionize the mental set up of the traditional society through their indigenous works of art but also hone their skills of artistic creation.

Coast. Signs have diverse meanings in diverse social and cultural contexts. Thus, socio-semiotics is socio-centred, going from context to text, not from text to context.

Social semiotics investigates the social dimensions of meaning which are shaped by relations of power. So any cultural products, including literary works and artworks, are not merely media of social meaning but also of power dynamics. It is the contestation of the power relationships from which evolves ideology. About such an evolution of ideology, Hodge and Kress (1988) observe:

To capture the contradiction characteristic of ideological forms, we will talk of ideological complexes.... An ideological complex exists to sustain relationships of both power and solidarity, and it represents the social order as simultaneously serving the interests of both dominant and subordinate. (p. 3)

Social semiotics supports a dialectically mediated approach that calls for a multidimensional and complex understanding of the interplay between agency and structure, between lived human experience and the social power relations to which literary works or artworks are linked. It aims at elaborating a new mode of analysis

that places more emphasis on the roles of socio-cultural contexts and the accosting power conflict and resistance which not only define the identity of the community but which ultimately point toward a transformation of the society.

Processes of struggle and resistance, which shape the transformation of a society, have a bearing on every level of semiotic systems, at the smallest level of which “power is put to the test in very exchange, and the logonomic system is typically a record of this” (Hodge & Kress, 1988, p. 8). The logonomic system—a set of rules prescribing the conditions for production and reception of meanings—is integral part of an ideological complex as it specifies ‘who’ claims to initiate or know meanings about ‘what’ topic

‘under what circumstances’ and ‘with what modalities’. Logonomic systems as

ideological complexes “reflect contradictions and conflicts in the social formations” (Hodge & Kress, 1988, p. 5). When a logonomic system tolerates, for instance, a statement insulting to women to be read as a joke, it refers to a male-dominated structure of the society.

Similarly, if a society, as does Mithila, puts up with female infanticide, this means, it is a male-dominated society and a female writer or artist may be highly critical of it. Let us have a basic illustration of the above-outlined account of socio-semiotics by analyzing the following painting (Figure 1) by a contemporary Madhuani painter, Rani Jha:

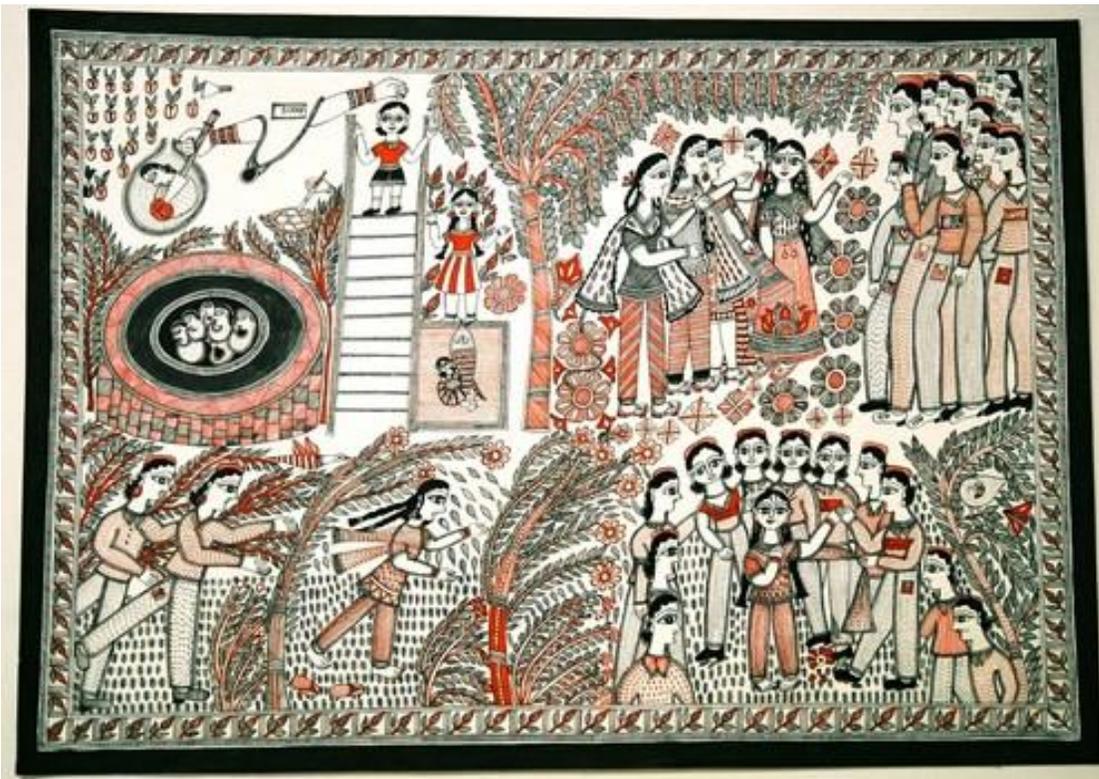


Figure 1: Rani Jha's female infanticide (Source: <http://peterzirmis.com/post/58303202722/rani-jha-feminist-perspectives-in-mithila-art>).

Rani Jha's "Female Infanticide" painting, displayed on a tableau on a large scale, evokes more a theatrical scene rather than a naturalistic illustration. The choice of the tableau immediately points to one set of logonomic rules: the dramatic-ironic intensity of the unnatural behaviour. With this rule underway, the societal precedence of a boy (shown on a ladder) over a girl (depicted by the cobra coiled around her feet) also turns out to be unnatural. Visually, this text receives two intense degrees of illegitimation: the Maithili society's oppression of the female and a grotesque deconstruction of the Maithili marriage ritual of matkor in which water from the well and soils near it are used to sanctify the marriage mandap so that longevity of conjugal life is ensured through regular fertility. Fertility is repulsively distorted through an ironic dumping of the female foetus in the same well. The whole procreation that is supposed to ensure matrimonial and familial bliss through legitimatization of sex via the system of marriage looks obnoxiously abnormal due to female infanticide, which is so strongly suggested by the cobra out to bite the infant-girl to death. Such a production and appearance of the text have direct impact on reception. The viewers are placed as audience in a drama and, like them, are directly hit by the intensity of the monstrosity of the illegitimate action. The patriarchal ideology at work in female infanticide and the reverse ideology remains in ironic collision, so to say, with the latter winning out as the monstrous unnaturalness of the action is conveyed to the audience with dramatic intensity.

The socio-semiotic approach to the analysis of Mithila painting gains in legitimacy from the central argument of a book like *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006). The book makes the point that the visual is an organized and structured message, connected to the verbal text but not dependent on it. This contention marks a departure from Roland Barthes's argument in "Rhetoric of the Image" that the meanings of images are too polysemous to be deciphered separately from the verbal text. The duo—Kress and Leeuwen—repeatedly stress the social and ideological components of sign making, interpretation, and valuation. Decoding visuals requires attention to the reading pattern and other cultural aspects of a particular country: "The place of visual communication in a given society can only be understood in the context of, on the one hand, the range of forms or modes of public communication available in that society and, on the other hand, their uses and valuations" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 35). The authors take this kind of understanding of visual images as figuring out what they call the "semiotic landscape"—"the features of a landscape (a field, a wood, a clump of trees, a house, a group of buildings) only make sense in the context of their whole environment and of the history of its development" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 35). How a particular culture takes a specific kind of landscape remains central in socio-semiotic analysis. In other words, socio-semiotics attaches importance to cultural geography. After all, people and their cultural representations are controlled by the

geographical environment in which they develop.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

Rani Jha, a devoted artist and scholar of Mithila art, most often talks about women's woes in family life and depict the same in her paintings so that the representation can act as visual education for the common folk in the region (Sahapedia, 2016). She has been teaching students about the folk art for several years, and this researcher met her at Mithila Art Institute (Madhubani) while she was training a group of girls in Madhubani art.

Rani first found work as a painter in an NGO where she was placed in a government Short Stay Home where women abandoned by their families or for those who took refuge there to escape abuse from families were sheltered.

She was entrusted with the task of listening to the inmates' stories. She took a step further and started painting their life stories on the walls of the shelter home.

When Rani was growing up she had seen most of the women in her community as veiled lesser beings cribbed and cabined within the four walls of the house. She had fantasized to tear apart their veil for their intercourse with the outside world. Wadley (2014) interviews Rani where the artist conveys "And the things that I cannot convince society through fighting... I try to show through my artwork." She intends to reveal the pitiable condition of Maithili women and their excessive tolerant behavior plus her paintings also assert how these women are coming up tearing the social barriers the way she has empowered herself. It is this fantasy which finds expression in her following painting (Figure 2):



*Figure 2: Together tearing the veil (Source: <http://peterzirniss.com/post/58303202722/rani-jha-feminist-perspectives-in-mithila-art>).*

The above painting encourages women to join hands together against the veil system which remained one of the social obstacles for ages and this painting reveals this public evil on the part of Maithili ladies that awakes people against this genuine problem and gradually the community opens up and accepts the assertion of art in this regard. As a result, womenfolk uncover their faces and feel comfortable to work outside their homes. This is a kind of freedom for the women the artist seeks to evoke through her art. Scattered eyes in the portrait demonstrate that

vision the artist aspires for the betterment of women in the community. As a consequence, the veil system seems almost having waned in the town. The artist gives the practical impression in this sense because women hardly talk with the strangers but basically it is her high qualification that boosts her up to unveil the social discrimination against the female.

However, the following piece by Rani Jha still represents the reality for most women in Mithila:



Figure 3: Gazing at the moon (Source: <http://peterzirnis.com/post/58303202722/rani-jha-feminist-perspectives-in-mithila-art>).

Despite the fact that Maithili society is on the way towards women empowerment, most women still have a very constricted existence. The woman, in the above painting,

has all the physical luxuries which mean little to her inside her golden cage; she wants to traverse limitlessly like the moonshine.

Not only do the age-old social restrictions cause women disempowerment but so do economic stringencies, since their husbands

are often forced to leave and look for work far away from home, thereby causing the pangs of the swan-like separation (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Husband leaving for work (Source: <http://peterzirnis.com/post/58303202722/rani-jha-feminist-perspectives-in-mithila-art>).

The entire Maithili society faces migration for work problem where male members go outside to work and their female members stay at home waiting for him for months and years fearing whether they would come or not. Such a psychological torture disturbs family life and its ill effect redounds on the coming generation who becomes unable to

have an integrated personality. This defect damages the whole society and people at large cannot lead a happy and satisfied life.

One of the most serious drawbacks eating into the vitals of the Maithili society is female feticide through abortion (Figure 5):



Figure 5: Abortion clinic (Source: <http://peterzirnis.com/post/58303202722/rani-jha-feminist-perspectives-in-mithila-art>).

This piece criticizes the society for gender discrimination where preference of male child appears huge in comparison to female ones, most of whom are killed in foetus-stage. This further affects the psychology of girls who find themselves insecure not to travel anywhere alone. Likewise they lose confidence to perform anything independently and it leads to a family cart pulled solely by male members. This phenomenon makes the ladies fall behind than their male counterparts, thereby affecting the community negatively. But the focus of this painting centres on the image of doctor inside a cobra which validates the saying ‘doctor as dacoit’ who takes abortion

as a means of earning and contravenes the government regulation.

Subjecting women to abortion, however, has directly exposed Maithili women to modernity which, however, also contributes to the relaxing of the restrictions on womankind. In this context, Rani Jha in an interview entitled “Visual and Material Arts: On Mithila Painting in Conversation with Rani Jha” narrates her self-empowering story and how she reflects that in her visual art. The next painting (Figure 6) uses women’s dress to illustrate the change in societal norms over the last half century, resulting in greater freedom for women.



Figure 6: Changing women (Source: <http://peterzirnis.com/post/58303202722/rani-jha-feminist-perspectives-in-mithila-art>).

The first (from right) panel shows a veiled woman heavily ornamented with eight children. This represents as if women were child producing machines, confined within the four walls and with their body being burdened with substantial jewelries. As the time passes, the veil lifts up, number of jewels decreases along with children, consequently, a woman at the far left has no veil and bracelet but a daughter. This shift points towards women's freedom in the

society where they occupy more space creating nuclear family. This gives young couples more freedom but at the same time their children lack moral guidance as the old parents are forced to be away from them. Besides, their children deviate from the right path and cannot get maturity at emotional development. Such a subtle view the artist fosters through her following painting (Figure 7):



Figure 7: Parents forced from the home (Source: <http://peterzirniss.com/post/58303202722/rani-jha-feminist-perspectives-in-mithila-art>).

In addition, the artwork depicts pitiable condition of the present-day Maithili family where elderly members are forced to be away from their own sons and grand-children who basically need their support in the gasping years of their life. The artwork also points to the cultural deficit that the grandchildren face, since they are deprived of the traditional tales and stories that the seniors tell the juniors.

Attachment between the older and younger generation may be a far cry in contemporary

Mithila, but bonding among women is still a reality (Figure 8). Maithili women love to gossip and usually have close friends to share ills and wills that provide them a kind of freshness after tedious family chores. Basically, their conversation ends nowhere but proves a boon to them physically and psychologically as it empties their mind of trauma and refreshes their tired body so that they again take to their tasks with renewed vigour.



Figure 8: Two women gossiping (Source: <http://peterzirniss.com/post/58303202722/rani-jha-feminist-perspectives-in-mithila-art>).

Gossiping creates congenial environment that helps maintain cordial relationship between the women. Ornamentation, gesture and overall decoration make the painting a masterpiece work of art. The three coloured border adds a concluding remark which demonstrates how women find space to express themselves away from their male counterparts.

Thus, Rani Jha's contemporary paintings, which have feminist perspectives, show the changing faces of Maithil women with all their problems, desires and resistances. Her addressal of the women's issues through

Mithila painting shows that the ancient art, which is almost monopolized by women, can be exploited to spread women empowerment. Finally, Rani Jha's paintings show that the ancient art of Mithila painting can be successfully utilized to express contemporary concerns.

A male counterpart of Rani Jha, who similarly utilizes Mithila art to highlight contemporary issues is S. C. Suman from Nepal. He comes up with such artworks which are deftly done on any topics that interest him. He performs by using any styles—shading, hatching, tattoo, etc.—prevalent in the region and sometimes he mixes other indigenous—Tharu, Rajbanshi,

Newar, etc.—styles too to make his works of art cohesive and comprehensive. Some of his paintings give the impression of Paubha or Thangka painting (Buddhist art), popular in the Kathmandu Valley. The fusion is accomplished with such dexterity that some of his contemporary colleagues—Mithila artists like Indrakala Nidhi, Sudhira Karna and Madan Kala Karna—take him as a living legend of the folk art of Nepal. About this, Yadav (2016) remarks: S.C Suman is both an oddity and an icon, as he has gone against the tide and established his name as one of the

finest painters of Mithila art. Suman's versatility extends to his ability to integrate a wide range of subject matters (religious, political, national,

international, ecological, and environmental) to make his paintings pioneering both at aesthetic and the pragmatic levels. The beauty his art enfolds catches the attention of the viewers and leaves an indelible stamp in their mind even as it conveys a social message, for example, the following piece (Figure 9).



Figure 9: *Public health* (2015) (Source: Collection: S.C. Suman).

The above painting highlights the significance of sanitation in the rural area of Mithila where people prefer to pee and defecate in the open area, thereby causing several communicable diseases which ultimately affect the entire community. It shows common folks discussing the importance of cleanliness to the younger generation and fixing tap, wash room so that children right from the young age will learn to use them properly. Hence, the painting

uses both male and female characters and mother guides her son towards the lavatory, carrying pail in the left hand and holding her son by her right hand. Such gestures demonstrate to the onlookers the public enthusiasm towards the changing pattern at the local level. At the right end of the portrait a young boy washes her hand at the tap after coming from the latrine, while the other two men are depicted as being curious about the changes. On top of all, the setting looks quite

natural and pastoral amid the open field while a green tree stands on the far left with curly border at the bottom that identifies Suman's unique style where vegetation from one way or the other prevails. The canvas exerts magical effect on the spectators who feel inspired towards maintaining appropriate hygiene in the family. The artist's legerdemain lies in his ability to create a textile-like design. His deep meditation on the content coupled with his fabric skill that helps him hone in his hatching style make him a master artist.

Moreover, Suman's meticulous attention to detail is amazing. His detailed carefulness is also evident even when he tries his hand at various media including acrylic, natural pigment and mixed media. As Nishimura (2017) rightly remarks, "With mandalas nestled among the leaves of tree branches, tessellated fish swimming in celestial ponds and the use of short brush strokes to create variegated constellations, there is no limit to Suman's imaginative spirit" (The Mithila Avatar). He cleverly uses the imaginative spirit for political messages. Let's have a look at the following piece (Figure 10).



Figure 10: Urging for peace (Source: Artist's Own Collection. Photo by Santosh Kumar Singh in 2015).

The above painting, drawn at the time of Maoist insurgency when Mother Nepal was weeping for her children's safety, urges for

peace in the country. The artist takes account of the prevalent Maithili symbol of white palm with red dot that signifies protection

with life energy which suggests fertility among the common folks—a usual scene during marriage as a blessing to the newlyweds but here the white palm indicates peace and harmony, as the colour white denotes purity and red dot points towards the victory of truth over evil. The juxtaposition of both the colours tellingly creates an image of Mother Nature as a nurturer—a role ironically mocked by the mayhem caused during the insurgency. The irony allows the political message to get conveyed with dramatic intensity. On the very left of the painting, Nepal aama (mother) finds herself bulleted due to the ongoing war in the country which reveals whoever wins mother will suffer. The black heads scattered below at the centre represents the dead people who were

children of this country, and it forecasts more violence for the future. The upper palm impression with red dot symbolizes the focal point of all the citizens. The use of these colours in the form of resembling powders, according to Yadav (2016), “[. . .] complete” the traditional Mithila artwork “patterns” made with a paste of finely ground rice. Suman completes his artwork with the use of the red mark which underscores the power of life in the midst of mayhem.

Suman excels as an artist with his acute sense of details and functional use of colours in his compositions which look so natural with his folk-like imitation of folk narratives in the context of the problems brought about by modernity in the contemporary world (Figure 11).



*Figure 11: Expectation belied (Source: Artist's Own Collection. Photo by Santosh Kumar Singh in 2015).*

In the above painting, the expectation of peaceful, developed and delightful life which the people aspired after the Maoist

insurgency seems to be a far cry. Suman captures this bitter reality by using symbols like lotus flower, distorted image of Gautam

Buddha, and the common folks at the lower position in the portrait. The lotus flower, situated at an elevation, is intended for torchlight to people at the difficult time for a fruitful result. Despite the expectation of a fruitful result, the overall impression created particularly by the distorted image of the Buddha and the fuzzed figures of the citizens—male and female—at the lower portion of the portrait is one of hope belied. The atmosphere of despair is further deepened by the irony generated by the political representatives who are shown wearing expensive clothes and heavy ornaments but are with hollow heads—unable to solve the burning problem. The final nail in the coffin, so to say, is driven by the ironic figure of the pregnant fish which stands for fecundity and life: vibrant Nepali life is being so grossly mismanaged by the inept but corrupt political class.

It will be, however, wrong to take S. C. Suman's paintings as being merely defeatist,

for in the Kalpavriksha series of artworks, he conveys a message of hope. Kalpavriksha, a divine wish-granting tree as per Hindu mythology evolved from water during Samundra Manthan — the churning of the ocean by gods and demons. Shiva and Parvati, after much painful discussions while parting with their daughter Aranyani, gave her away to the divine Kalpavriksha for bringing up her with safety, wisdom, health, and happiness so that she could become Vana Devi (the protector-goddess of forests). For the Hindus, trees are at the centre of life: besides the fruits that they provide, it is under the tree that people take shelter, and gather to be with each other; lovers meet for amorous moments and the sage contemplates. The tree of life thus becomes not only the Kalpavriksha, the wish-fulfilling tree, but also the bodhi tree, the tree of knowledge. Let's have a look at the following piece painted in 2013:



Figure 12: Tree of Life with Peacocks (Source: *Mithila Cosmos: Circumambulating the Tree of Life* (2014).

The above piece depicts the much-valued *kadam* tree (burflower) in Mithila which provides a serene, cool shelter to the travellers battered by heat apart from providing plenty of food to monkeys and birds. It is the same tree, on one of the branches of which Lord Krishna is believed to have sat and plucked up the garments of

the naked maidens bathing in the Yamuna River. In this work, the *kadam* tree's branches are full of ripe fruits and vivacious peacocks. The overall ambience that obtains in is one of halcyon times, splendid beauty, ecological harmony, and romantic love—a brimming joyfulness at odds with the

melancholy despair underpinning most of Suman's 2011 paintings.

A similar kind of blissful harmony is available in the following *Kalpavriksha* piece (Figure 13).



*Figure 13: Celebrations around the tree of life (Source: Mithila Cosmos: Circumambulating the Tree of Life (2014).*

The above piece displays the complementary triad of roots, trunks and branches that mirror the three realms of subconscious, consciousness and transcendence—a balance among which ensures a righteous course of

life for the Maithils. The Maithils connecting with each other on the ground seem to be in rapport with the fish beneath and the peacocks above, thereby enhancing a sense of living in harmony with Nature—an

ecological co-existence at a time when modernity is out to undermine it.

Suman's Kalpavriksha artworks stem from his hopeful contemplation of Nepal's political situation at a time when constitution-making, after the second Constituent Assembly, seemed to arrest the freefall in the aftermath of the Maoist revolution and the fiasco of the first Constituent Assembly.

### Conclusion

Wrapping up, two of the celebrated exponents of contemporary Mithila art are Rani Jha from Madhubani (India) and S. C. Suman (Nepal). Their artworks show increasing responsiveness to socio-cultural and political issues in their respective countries. While Jha's paintings broach the topic of Maithil women's empowerment through a dramatization of their aspiration, obstacle and defiance, her Nepali counterpart's artworks, which fuses traditional Mithila style of painting with Thangka style, zero in on Nepal's current political problems. While his 2011 paintings are ironically defeatist, the 2013 paintings under the overarching title of Kalpavriksha are metaphorically exuberant, exuding hope.

### Competing Interests

The author declares that no competing interests exist.

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