

Post Colonial Approaches Reflected in the Works of Bangladeshi Female Artists

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Abstract

Post colonialism is a modern phenomenon; a much talked about one in the art circle especially since the 1960's. Co-incidentally, the journey of Bangladeshi women painters also started during the same time-frame. It is obvious that aspects of decolonization are Omni-present in the works of the active women artists of Bangladesh. It is reflected in their choice of themes, images, and symbols that do not imitate colonial approaches, influencing the academic art of Bangladesh since the eighteenth century. This paper is an attempt to find out how this change took place, why especially the women artists have played a more active role in formulating a new vocabulary to counter the euro-centrism that was and is so strongly present in the art circle here. In doing so, mainly the exhibition catalogues of the major events are analyzed with the help of interviews with the artists themselves.

Key Words: Women artists, de-colonization, feminist art, post-colonialism

Introduction

Although Bangladesh has a long heritage of art-practice dating back to the second millennium BC, the approaches towards art was formulated here during the 18th and the 19th centuries by the British ruling elites. Since then, the art circle here had been developing around those ideas, especially in the academia. However, calls for a counter-current are bubbling up in recent times that are evident in the choice of themes, images, and symbols in the works of the artists. The trends reflect themes beyond the idea of 'modernism' developed during the two hundred and fifty years of academic art practice. Quite a number of artists are trying to formulate a new vocabulary to counter the euro-centrism. There are active artists of both sexes, but the women artists seem to be more active in the process.

Methodology

This study is designed as an exploratory research to generate insights and ideas,

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which may guide further research in this area. Hence, no structured or standardized data collection tools have been used. Rather, informal qualitative methods are used to collect and analyse data. A cognitive analysis of the artworks produced by female artists active in Bangladesh is the basis of this study. The timeframe is not restricted; however, the artworks consulted are mainly generated by artists active since the second half of the twentieth century. In all, five female artists have been selected for case studies considering their representation of the subject and timespan. The artworks were examined on the basis of their conceptual representation.

To collect data, exhibition catalogues have been used as the primary source. Semi-structured interviews are conducted with relevant artists to understand the concepts and techniques used in the artworks as well as examine their artistic practices. To examine the context, the artists background along with the intended audiences are considered; the iconographic analysis is attempted by examining the symbolic and allegorical meanings embedded in the artworks while comparative analysis is done by relating the artworks to the other art forms or cultural artifacts to reveal similarities and differences. On the process of the thematic analysis, ideas expressed in established theories have been compared to find out whether there is post-colonial approach is displayed on the theme, technique or visualization along with an effort to find out how far the approach corresponds to the idea of post-colonialism.

The idea of post-colonialism

Post-colonialism is a modern phenomenon; a much talked about one in the art circle especially since the 1960's. The term is used most simplistically to define the transition from colonialism among formerly colonized nations. Obviously, the idea spread over the globe strongly since the end of the Second World War, when most of the European colonies around Asia, Africa and Latin America started to disintegrate and the life after colonization actually begun. The philosophical roots of the theory is found in the theories championed by Frankfurt School philosophers Fanon, Arendt, Adorno, Horkheimer and Foucault; 'who were all concerned with strategies of institutionalized power informing an elite's reproduction of itself and its relations to individuals.'¹ However, its intellectual and theoretical foundation is believed to be explicitly explained in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). Together these texts examine the West's historical construction of the Orient as the oppositional referent— the Other— to itself, both as essentialized self-reflection and constructed mimesis.² Since then, numerous introductory texts have been written that seek to deal with the definitional ambiguities and parameters of post-colonialism.³ The idea is often compared with theories of imperialism, modernity, racism, feminism, ethnicity, cultural geography and specifically with globalization, post-modernism and decolonization. Like all

these theories, post-colonialism is essentially a political theory, but its implications are far reaching, it definitely creates scope to be spread over the fields of cultural arena including literature and arts. The idea has a close relation with the idea of modernism as well and it has been elaborated in the context of subcontinent by Faisal Devji in his thesis, titled *Muslim Nationalism: Founding Identity in Colonial India*⁴ and Shruti Kapila in her recently published book *Violent Fraternity: Indian Political Thought in the Global Age*⁵.

In the field of art, identity and self-representation are central themes for the post-colonial artists. They often challenge stereotypical representations of their cultures and attempt to rewrite narratives by reinterpreting traditional art forms or using archival materials to reclaim cultural memories of the past that were suppressed by the colonial hegemony. Critiquing power structures and inequality, exploring the experiences of displacement, exile, and transnational identities also got importance in post-colonial art. One of the strongest tools for the female painters in expressing these ideas is feminism, because it simultaneously contests the stereotypical representations of identity and the hegemonic power structure.

The Feminist Gaze

The identity of womanhood is one of the hardest obstacles women have to face in all areas of life in a colonial atmosphere. Life as an artist is no exception, and the female artists of Bangladesh have responded with strong feminist gaze. The story of Bangladeshi female artists begun with the five women, Tahera Khanam, Rowshan Ara, Hasina Ali, Jubaida Akter Khatun and Syeda Moyeenah Ahsan getting admitted to the Government Institute of Fine Arts, Dhaka during the 1954–55 session. Among them, only Tahera Khanam, who later married the famous artist Qayyum Chowdhury had continued with the skill learned at the institute. Not even Tahera had managed to feature herself in any professional exhibition. The first woman to have a solo painting exhibition in Dhaka was Durre Khanam, better known as Rumi Islam. The exhibition was held in 1960, two years after she had completed her education at the Institute of Fine Art. That too was possible because she did marry another famous artist, Aminul Islam. That shows how complicated was the possibility of taking art as profession for any woman in Bangladesh even during the 1960's. Things however started to change after the independence of Bangladesh in 1971 and since the 1970's we can see quite a few female artists active in the art circle in Dhaka.

Among them, Nazlee Laila Mansur (born 1952), Farida Zaman (born 1953) and Nasreen Begum (born 1956) were the the pioneers of the feminist trend. However, the trend is most vibrant in Rokeya Sultana's (born 1958) works. She has created a series titled *Madona*, a trendsetter one that sees the womanhood in a new light. The *Madona* of Rokeya represents the everyday woman, moving around in the crowd, facing the danger of being manhandled, yet her presence cannot be ignored. The artist herself claims that *Madona* is not only a simple

piece of art, it is a movement, ‘She is vulnerable because although she is a peacemaker, she is prepared to fight. She is a symbol for all women. She changes throughout time, but she is forever performing the same role.’⁶ As a symbol of her feminine identity rooted in the Bengali traditions, Rokeyas Madona is always draped in a magenta shari. The colour, magenta, is a symbol of transforming negativity through the feminine psyche according to the artist, ‘Magenta is on the verge of being an aggressive form of red, but it is softer, more playful and more positive.’⁷ Championing the feminine identity is a post-colonial vibe itself, and setting it in the cultural context of Bangladesh also represents an attempt to challenge the colonial hegemony by reclaiming cultural memories of the past.

In one of the most fascinating artwork of the series, *Madona in a Bus* (Plate 1) Madona is portrayed as a mother,



Plate 1: *Madona in a Bus*, Rokeya Sultana (1986)

traveling with her child on a crowded bus. The inspiration to depict the battle of a lonely mother in rearing her child actually came from her own life, she had to face a tough time when her personal relationship with her husband, a renowned cricketer Omar Khaled Rumi was failing apart.⁸ In other paintings of this series, *Madona* and her child is also seen wading in a boat, on a Rickshaw or just walking hands in hands. Rokeya even portrayed some of her women with multiple hands and breasts, resembling the goddesses of Indian mythology.

During the twentieth and early twenty first centuries, the likes of Tayeba Begum Lipi, Fareha Zeba, Maksuda Iqbal Nipa and Joya Shahrin Huq also took feminism as a strong attribute of their artwork. Among them, Lipi (born 1969) is known for her feminist concerns that sharply criticize the prejudiced nature of our social structures, where the position of women is very



Plate 2: *Toys Watching Toys*, Tayeba Begum Lipi (2002)

fragile. She has exhibited in quite a few exhibitions revolving around this theme including the Kathmandu Triennale 2017, her joint exhibition with Mahbubur Rahman titled *Toys Watching Toys* at Dhaka's Alliance Française in 2002 and her solo exhibition titled *This is What I Look(ed) Like* at Sundaram Tagore Gallery, New York in 2019. A versatile artist, Lipi has worked with many mediums, such as installations and sculptures, digital multimedia, painting and print-making. But it is her razor blade and mixed media installations that showcase her strong feminist vibe. In her first exhibition in 2002, she addressed gendered identity in an increasingly Islamist Bangladesh at that point through installations. In one of those, mannequins with fiberglass casts of Lipi's head and clad in all-black veils faced oil on canvas self-portrait tryptic of the artist (Plate 2). In the larger than life portraits, she appears unveiled and wearing make-up. The contrasting depictions of herself look towards each other suspiciously, questioning the other's identity and alliances.⁹

An even stronger feminist approach is seen in her video *I Wed Myself* (2010), premiered at the Venice Biennale in 2011. In this video Lipi performed pre-wedding preparations as both bride and groom. Showcasing in both genders, she took a very bold approach challenging gender hierarchies of religion, marriage, and family.¹⁰

Nazlee Laila Mansur comes from a different background; unlike Rokeya or Lipi, she was a student of the Department of Fine Art, Chittagong University. Born in Rajshahi and having educational and career background rooted in Chittagong, she has experienced what life outside the Bangladeshi capital is like for the women. However, her works seems to show more resemblance to the urban landscape of Dhaka. Especially the vivid colours that are sort of her trademark are strongly influenced by the Rickshaw paintings of Dhaka. It is a genre developed by the subaltern, self-educated artists of urban Dhaka. Nazlee is not ashamed to confess her adoration of this genre. 'I wish to be able to paint like the rickshaw painters', she says.¹¹

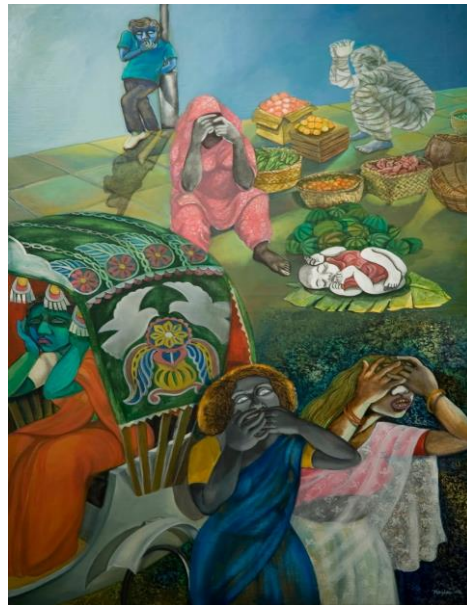


Plate 3: *Bandaged Bondage (Child)*
Nazlee Laila Mansur (2002)

Subaltern art traditions usually involve a trend of story-telling. Nazlee also likes to tell stories through her artworks, and her stories almost always have a feminist

narrative. Even when she portrays men, young or adult, their slobbering gaze towards women around is clearly visible. In her trademark series titled 'Bandaged Bondage' she has portrayed many such characters, like the whistling young man standing by the light-post (Plate 3) or the gentleman wearing a tie passing the traffic island where a destitute woman is sleeping with her garments disarranged. The 'gentleman's gaze on the woman and his fingers gripping the car window as if he wants to grasp her as well, clearly shows his intensions.¹²

Fareha Zeba (born 1961) advances one step ahead; she has named one of her artwork itself as *The Feminist Gaze* (Plate 4).¹³ Zeba is a basically a printmaker whose work often explores themes related to gender, identity, and cultural hybridity.¹⁴ A self confessed feminist, Zeba has created a series on Frida Kahlo; comparing the feminist Mexican painter and activist with Begum Sufia Kamal, a prominent women rights activist of Bangladesh she has also created a series *Twilight Magic* titled remembering Sufia Kamal's famous anthology of poems *Sanjher Maya*.

Nazlee, Rokeya, Lipi or Zeba are the trendsetters, however the strong feminist approach they professed in their artworks are omnipresent in many of the contemporary female painters. Together, they have contributed a lot in the process of decolonizing the art of Bangladesh.



Plate 4: *The Feminist Gaze*,
Fareha Zeba (2002)

Decolonization of the Forms

The curriculum of art education that is being followed in Bangladesh was essentially developed during the British rule with an eye on creating a bunch of trained craftsmen who would serve the government.¹⁵ This is what Edward Saeed called colonial mindset, marking the 'otherness' of the colonized society, and by terming them 'inferior' establishing the greatness of the colonists.¹⁶ How do we get rid of this mindset? A K M Khademul Haque has made a detailed discussion on this in his lecture delivered at the 105th Annual Conference of College Art Association, New York in 2017.¹⁷ The process is manifold, but one of the most important aspects is reshuffling the established art forms.

Nazlee Laila Mansur's obsession with the subaltern rickshaw painting is an ample example of how the female painters of Bangladesh are contesting the hegemonic art-idiom. She has chosen the non-academic color palate and subjects like the prostitutes living in the street. Many others like Kanak Chapa Chakma, Dilara Begum Jolly, Atia Islam Anne, Joya Shahrin Huq and Farzana Rahman Bobby has experimented with this approach, but often their efforts ended up in a trap of hybrid identity that is a common feature of colonized society, according to the post-colonial theorist Homi Bhaba.¹⁸ For example, Kanak Chapa Chakma's (born 1963) unique perspective and focus on the indigenous Chakma community in which she was raised is clearly visible



Plate 5: *Walk to Work*
Kanak Chapa Chakma (2014)

in her works; however, in her continuous effort to explore cultural identity, traditions, roots and human rights in the Chittagong Hill Tracts often she uses the metaphoric art-idioms of the western art cannon. Her choice of color is dominated by the vivid trio of red, yellow and blue. Her use of color and human figures shows a very strong influence of the post-impressionist artist Paul Gauguin. Alexandra Cosmé opines that, 'In particular, she uses yellow to convey the hope and spirit of Chakma people. Often, she argues, this is what the Chakma people hold on to and what keeps them going. Red and orange mix to convey the festivals and immense joy felt by the Chakma people who are able to thrive and enjoy their cultural heritage.'¹⁹

Tayeba Begum Lipi's experiments are much more vibrant, as she has mostly experienced with art mediums. The art cannon established in Bangladesh is influenced by the British Academic Style²⁰ of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the major mediums include painting, sculpture and architecture. The mediums of painting included water-color, oil on canvas and the likes. However, Lipi has often worked with more than one medium to create her installations, like the one mentioned earlier, where fiberglass sculptures, woven garments and oil painting on canvas are used simultaneously to create a vocabulary that was not existent in the established cannon. In *I wed Myself* she has experimented even more, it is actually a video documentary where she has played the role of both bride and groom. Apart from experiment with the mediums and forms, she has challenged the stereotypical representation of identity, a phenomenal resemblance with the post-colonial approach.

Conclusion

The artworks of the contemporary female artists of Bangladesh show a vibrant trend of post-colonialism. The artists are in constant efforts to uphold their social and political stance on issues related to gender, identity, and empowerment, using a variety of visual techniques and styles that contests the established art-cannon. One of the strongest tools in this regard is off course feminism, challenging the stereotypical representation of identity. It is understood that sometimes their stances show kind of a biased apprehension but considering the unique challenges they face due to gender biases and societal expectations, it is an unavoidable consequence. The most intriguing aspect is that in the process of their efforts, they are experimenting with newer art forms, not explained or coded in the established art-idioms. There is also a visible bias to the indigenous and subaltern art forms including choice of colours and subjects. Consciously or not, these efforts are contributing towards the process of decolonization of Bangladeshi art.

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