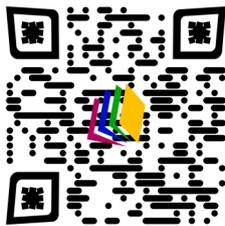


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## **Engendering the Feminine in Visual Arts**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

Art in itself is an activity of participation, and involves not only the artist, and the muse, but the viewer as well. Due to this three-dimensional nature, the production of art does not stop after its initial creation, but goes beyond to the response it attracts. Gender becomes one of the many lenses through which a study of the visual can be undertaken. Any object thus needs to be subjected to the questions of how to read such a source or the context in which it is placed, the identity of the artists, and their sources of patronage. Its current situation further adds another degree of interaction with the source. Therefore, any sculpture or painting cannot be viewed in isolation. Engendering any art requires a set of tools that are at the disposal of the analyser. The paper attempts at locating gender via a study of the celestial females, and further by focusing on the example of the famous Dīdārganj Yakṣi, to also study the issue of the gaze in the process of engendering of the visual.

**KEY WORDS:** Art, Gender, Sculpture, Feminism, Visual Art, History

Art in itself is an activity of participation, and involves not only the artist, and the muse, but the viewer as well. Due to this three-dimensional nature, the production of art does not stop after its initial creation, but goes beyond to the response it attracts. Gender becomes one of the many lenses through which a study of the visual can be undertaken. Any object thus needs to be subjected to the questions of how to read such a source or the context in which it is placed, the identity of the artists, and their sources of patronage. Its current situation further adds another degree of interaction with the source. Therefore, any sculpture or painting cannot be viewed in isolation. Engendering any art requires a set of tools that are at the disposal of the analyser. The paper attempts at locating gender via a study of the celestial females, and further by focusing on the example of the famous Dīdārganj Yakṣi, to also study the issue of the gaze in the process of engendering of the visual.

Judith Butler's seminal work on gender and its nature becomes crucial to understand this process. The categories of 'sex' and 'gender' are different in their very nature. Sex is a biological entity that is determined by physical characteristics specific to males and females. Gender on the other hand is a social construct that influences the individuals' psychological arena due to its potent presence in the normative behaviour. Gender is also thus "performative" in its essence, predetermined by the norms of society and the context in which one exists.<sup>45</sup> Gender studies via art thus becomes an activity that also looks at the society and mentalities of the context in which it is constructed, and placed. Female body becomes the location for engendering process that also during the 19<sup>th</sup> century had an attached stereotype of racist ideas of sexuality and eroticism. The case of Sarah Bartman, also derogatively known as the "Hottentot Venus" is a case in point. The Victorian reactions towards the images of the Lajjā Gaurī led to the isolation of these sculptures into the private collections, and allowed for a misreading of the depictions as "shameless woman", or the "nude squatting Goddess".<sup>46</sup> While miraculous births are not uncommon in the mythology, the human form was symbolic of divine creation. The depiction of the goddess as having a lotus, or a *kumbha* in the place of head with or without hands (Form II, and III) while presenting the divine creation were also at the same time representations of fertility, wherein the identity of the female was reduced to her virtue of procreation.

It is crucial to remember that not all representations of the female body are divine in nature, and thus cannot be uniformly addressed as "mother goddesses". Many sculptural types are simple depictions of mother and child without necessarily being divine. The evidence gathered

from 2nd century BCE displays various specimens of the mother goddess cult. Representations of divine feminine figures in the Mauryan period were depicted with having broad hips and elaborate headdresses. They were often heavy bodied, wearing an applique collar and girdle and a clearly marked girdle.<sup>47</sup> Observing methodically, the treatment of *divine* goddesses such as Gaurī and Skanda, or Hāritī is different from the sensual nude images of other *celestial* females. 'Celestial' refers to the beings that reside in the ethereal realm, but without the powerful presence and responsibilities of the divine. Durgā therefore cannot be measured in the same scale as Urvaśī. These celestial females consist of images of *Apasaras*, *Yakṣi's* and *Surasundarī's* among others, who are generally portrayed in the nude. While reading these sculptures in the present context, it must be remembered that the physical markers of beauty are socially determined. The contemporary trend of thin and tall does not conform to the ancient parameters of beauty. Similarly, the Victorian sensibilities were titillated and horrified at the same time when confronted with the overtly sensual and bold sculptural representations of the celestial females. Desai discusses the etymologies of the word *śobha* (beauty) and states that *śubha* (auspicious) shares the same root.<sup>48</sup> Effectively, it can be stated that; that which is beautiful is auspicious. Therefore, the inclusion of the celestial females such as the *Surasundarīs*, and *Śālabhañjikās* in the sculptural scheme was not only for the purpose of beautification, but also for harbingering auspiciousness.

The *Śālabhañjikā* sculptures depict the relation between the female body and the nature. The tree spirits aid the woman in conceiving and in return, the woman was to encourage the trees to blossom by easing *dohada*, or their yearning for female

company during fruit-budding season. *Dohada* as an activity is common in the classical sanskrit literature. Kālidāsa also refers to this *udyāna-krīdā* in his plays, without however making any reference to the term '*śālabhañjikā*'.<sup>49</sup> This thus created a cycle of reciprocal fertility, wherein the trees and the woman's fertile nature was being celebrated. Lynda Nead states that the feminine body is both the "*mater*" and "*materia*", with the female form being equated to nature, and thus representation of nude is that of the nature in its purest form. Such representation of vegetal and woman motif is prolific in Indian art, therefore drawing metaphorical links between woman's body and the nature.<sup>50</sup> The representation in the nude however is not always absolute. The physicality of the female nude is depicted explicitly, via overt and complete disclosure, either through a transparent drapery, or suggestively. Locating questions of gender in the visual requires a methodology that takes into account three major approaches of religion, text, and images. A balance between the viewing of men and women as "socio-sexual" entities and in the domains of spirituality wherein they are respectively located has to be struck in order to arrive at a holistic understanding.<sup>51</sup>

While evidence of agency of women in patronage is present, it is the depiction of women that that adheres to stereotyping. Exceptions of the divine feminine aside, the portrayal of the female figure has been imagined as voluptuous, and in attractive postures gazing towards self. During the early medieval period, the representations of the *alasa kanyās*, and *surasundarīs* were a part of the sculptural format of the temples. The Śilpa Prakāśa mentions sixteen maidens frozen in moments of various activities. *Darpaṇā*, for instance is the maiden that gazes at herself in the mirror; *Karpūramañjarī* is the maiden taking a bath among

others.<sup>52</sup> While the auspicious nature of these aesthetically pleasing females is crucial for understanding their placement of the temple walls, the issue of gaze cannot be ignored. The *alasa kanyā* figures are depicted in various poses of pulling a thorn, drying her hair among others that ooze sensuality. These scenes that are so common in the daily lives are presented in a manner that arouses the male gaze and plays to the voyeuristic tendencies. A female's body becomes a symbol of the male fantasies that are forced upon it, thereby moulding her into an object of desire.<sup>53</sup>

The Dīdārganj Yakṣi presents one of the best examples of the celestial females. The sculpture became very popular and in high demand in museums across the world, not only because of its high quality of production but also due to the sensuous nature of the *caurī* bearer herself. In order to depict the highly accentuated feminine characteristics of the Yakṣi sculpture, a clear eroticisation was also seen accompanying the process for the pleasure of the men constructed by the men. The representation of feminine figurines during this period was characterised by large breasts, small waists and wide hips.<sup>54</sup> In the case of the Dīdārganj Yakṣi it was the large breasts that became the central focus of the male gaze. The reception of the sculpture and the gaze it has borne on itself over time forms a crucial part of the engendering process. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the discovery of the Yakṣi saw varied reactions ranging from awe of its splendour to horror at such depictions. Cunningham had drawn the conclusion that such forms of deportment (semi-nude but heavily ornamented) must have been preferred publically by a certain class of women during the ancient Indian times.<sup>55</sup> One of the more overt reaction can be seen through a poetry composition in 1960's that had went on to describe the physical

features of the Yakṣi explicitly with using terms such as “broad thighs feasting senses”, “breasts between whose two suns a rivery necklace”.<sup>56</sup> The amalgamation of the overtly sexual symbolism with the reproductive nature of the feminine body found a representation in the aesthetic arena wherein the being of a female coalesced in her sexual appeal, and her role as progenitor.

Panofsky states that description should not be confused with analysis while studying art. A simple discussion of the object under scrutiny is very different than trying to read “intentions” in art.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, a study of any piece of art is not isolationist in its nature. Understanding the artist, and the social conventions of the time in which he operated leads to a multifarious reading of which gender forms a crucial part. Whether it is Manet’s Olympia that hinted at the changing social conditions of the working class women in the ‘realism-era’ France or the many controversial paintings of Husain, such as the Frolicking Ganesh among others, art reflects the socio-political conditions of the period. In case of ancient Indian art where the artist is rarely known and operates under a shroud of anonymity of the guilds, reading gendered discourses becomes a task of recognising the embedded nature of gender in art, and placing it in the larger context of the historical changes that were occurring to further understand the varied influences on art. Conclusively, it can be said that reading the visual sources is thus deeply engendered.

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