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Modern and contemporary art and art history have been his fields of interest, which has also enabled him to work on his curatorial projects like Material Metaphor in 2021. The online show focused on understanding experimental art practice and the concept of different women artists working with different forms of materials. The show is also related to his current research, which explores the idea of experimental material practice by contemporary Indian women artists, its history, stylistic shifts, and other critical aspects. He has presented papers for national and international

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Transcending Boundaries: Exploring the Artistic Innovations of Women Artists in South Asia

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Abstract

Since the early 20th century, Bengal (a geographical region expanding both in India and Bangladesh) has been a significant center for the development of modern art in South Asia. However, women artists are rarely recognized as trailblazers of artistic development in the realm of modern and contemporary art, in contrast to their male counterparts. But within the context of South Asia, there are a number of notable female artists who have not only established a unique visual language that transcended numerous boundaries but also managed to open up new avenues for creative expression for succeeding generations of artists. Significantly, a considerable number of these artists from South Asia have worked on a wide range of materials and methods that are informed by diverse contextual, conceptual, and aesthetic sensibilities.

The article aims to analyze the innovative methodologies adopted by women artists of different generations throughout South Asia as it traces the artistic trajectories of pioneering women artists. Artists such as, Meera Mukherjee, Novera Ahmed, Mithu Sen and Dilara Begum Jolly have explored new possibilities in visual realm and pushed the boundaries of conventional art practices with their own artistic language. The tactile and physical experience that

informed each artist's visual language is an essential component of all their work. A closer look at the unique visual dynamics exhibited in the artistic practices of these four female artists from different generations will contribute to the development of a more thorough understanding of modern and contemporary art in South Asia.

Key word- *Material, contemporary, tactile, woman, South Asia*

Introduction

To understand the role and context of any art practice, one must excavate and explore the history of the time in which the artwork or practice is situated. However, there has been a lacuna and certain gaps in the literature on female artists and their art practices throughout art history, whether in the west or the east. In order to understand this issue, it is essential to refer to Linda Nochlin's influential essay, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?"(Nochlin 2018). The essay critically examines the institutional obstacles that have traditionally impeded women's involvement and acknowledgment in the field of art, thereby challenging the established accounts of art history. Nochlin criticizes the concept of the isolated male prodigy and emphasizes the institutional prejudices and societal restrictions that have hindered women's ability to obtain art education, training, and chances for professional advancement. Nochlin pushes for a more inclusive and equitable interpretation of creative achievement and urges for a reevaluation of the standards used to determine artistic greatness by exposing the gendered dynamics present in art historical discourse. Her essay acts as a catalyst for more extensive discussions regarding gender representation, discrimination, and the imperative for systemic transformation within the arts.

Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock's, (Parker and Pollock 1981) writings are equally important to understand the history of the role of women in the context of art and craft. Artistic expression by women was largely confined to the domestic sphere for an extended period of time following the Renaissance, per the art and craft hierarchy. Art practice by women such as embroidery and painting were deemed crafty and incompatible for serious art historical discourse, whereas their male counterparts were granted greater recognition and access to such discussions.

In the South Asian subcontinent, Bengali women have played a significant role in preserving and developing traditional art forms such as 'nakshi kantha' (quilting), 'alpana' (floor decoration), and 'tepa putul' (clay dolls). These women have created their unique artistic language in these mediums of expression, independent of any formal academic education. However, it is crucial to look into the unique creative geniuses whose works have been lost to time and history and have disappeared from the discussions of art historical literature. Recent research conducted by individual researchers has provided new insights about certain individuals, such as Chitranibha Chowdhury¹. An acclaimed artist studied under the tutelage of Nandalal Bose in Santiniketan, Chitranibha Chowdhury's practice is lost in to the erosion of time. Very few art historical literature has explored her fascinating artistic practice. In 1938, after returning from Santiniketan Chitranibha Chowdhury painted a large mural at the residence of her brother-in-law, Jogendranath Chowdhury, in Dhaka. However, the large mural²

¹ *Chitranibha Chowdhury was a dexterous painter and designer who was formerly known as Nibhanoni and was later christened with the name Chitranibha by Rabindranath Tagore when she went to study at the Kala Bhavan in Santiniketan in 1928. She harnessed her skill and talent in painting at Kala Bhavan under the tutelage of Nandalal Bose and Benodebehari Mukherjee.*

² *The tragic fate of this expansive mural was known through the writings of the eminent painter and scholar Nisar Hossain, who had extensively researched and traced the original mural in the tragic state.*

(fig-1,2) had consisted of scenes of rural life and natural landscapes, but sadly, the original mural has been lost under the white distemper of the house that is now owned by a pump company and used as their office and storehouse. (Hossain, n.d.) The inability of a section of society to appreciate art, lack of thorough investigation, and failure to acknowledge the importance of these artists have irrevocably hindered the retrieval of these invaluable artworks.



Fig. 1 & 2- The mural at Jogendranath Chowdhury residence, Chitranibha Chowdhury, 1938. (Image source- Nisar Hossain's collection, Images were taken by the Hossain's brother before the walls were white washed)

An investigation into the lives and artistic creations of individuals such as Chitranibha Chowdhury could provide insights into the fate of countless priceless works of art. Numerous female artists have also been overlooked in the literature on art and academic discussions, despite their substantial contributions to the field of art. This paper will examine four such female artists hailing from both Indian and Bangladeshi. The featured artists include Meera Mukherjee from India, Novera Ahmed from Bangladesh, Mithu Sen from India, and Dilara Begum Jolly from Bangladesh. They were selected due to the distinctive approaches, which broke many preconceived ideas about the nature of artistic language and became significant in their own merit.

They freed the Forms from its confines- Artworks of Meera Mukherjee and Novera Ahmed

"Why cannot artists *become* craftsmen? In any manners, completely?"(Sunderason 2020), written in one of her journal entries, Meera Mukherjee expresses her perspective on art and its inherent link to the idea of craft, which she established through her language and profound involvement with the 'gharua' community in Bengal, as well as other metalcraft artisan communities in eastern and central India. Meera Mukherjee was an influential figure in the realm of Indian modern art, advocating for the appreciation of Indian crafts and challenging the notion of hierarchy between art and craft. In 1956, immediately following her return from Germany to India, she received a commission from the Anthropological Survey of India to record the artistic techniques employed by metal artisans in central India. This research had profound influence on her and over the following years, she began integrating folk art forms into her work.(Sunderason 2020)

Her research and experimentation with the "dhokra"³(Sunderason 2020) gave her a lot of knowledge about how to work with metal. Her language and oeuvre consisted of people and events that she had witnessed in her everyday life. Although, occasional appearances of historical figures can also be found, like 'Ashoka of Kalinga',1972 (fig.3). The bronze sculpture of the great Mauryan Emperor, standing at a height of 11 feet, was crafted using the cire perdue process, also known as the lost wax technique. Meera, after her interaction with the metalcraft community of Baster, had experimented with this method. The sculpture probably depicts

³ *Dhokra is a metal craft practiced by different metalcrafts artisan communities in Central and Eastern India. The technique is also known as cire perdue or the lost wax technique.*

Ashoka's realization of the consequences of his victory in the battle of Kalinga, which profoundly altered his perspective and the trajectory of his kingdom. The sculpture's blank, wide-eyed countenance evokes the traditional dhokra statuettes, while also capturing the grandeur and authority of a great ruler. Meera Mukherjee created a language that drew inspiration from the technique and materials used in metalcraft traditions infused with modern aesthetic sensibility. Her work embraced the dynamic and textured surfaces found in dhokra tradition which also brilliantly established a fluid synthesis with visual perception that were celebrated in modern art. Additionally, she incorporated her country's rich tradition and history into her artistic practice.



Fig.3- Ashoka of Kalinga, Meera Mukherjee (Image Courtesy: Nayanjot Lahiri, The Wire)

Meera Mukherjee's practice as a sculptor in the context of 'regional modernism' was unbound in her exploration of artistic practice that locates the idea of local and vernacular, incorporating ethnographic and anthropological nuances with a

sensitive eye towards art and craft. As art historian Nandini Ghosh writes (Ghosh 2018),

“Her role in this respect was not merely that of an urban modern artist who parasitically sought for motifs and structures from the folk practices; she had an active and dynamic engagement with the circuit, and worked in close harmony such that the relationship was in effect symbiotic. Since she had been trained abroad. She could be expected to have been aware of the trend within modern art identifies as ‘primitivism’, but her adoption of the marginal cultural expressions from her own national culture, for instance the dhokra metal casting and the kantha quilting process should probably be distinguished from the same.”

In the artwork "Pilgrims to Haridwar,"(fig.4) a group of men and women is depicted in a distinctive formation, clustered together while simultaneously moving towards their pilgrimage site. The sculpture symbolizes the “Kunwar Yatra”, a sacred pilgrimage undertaken by devotees in North India to worship Shiva. During this pilgrimage, the devotees carry a Kunwar or a pole with water pots to be filled in the river Ganges at Haridwar. They then transport the water back to their local shrines to pour it on the Shiva Linga as a gesture of reverence during the holy month of Shravan or August. Meera's many travels across the country have afforded her the chance to observe and engage with diverse individuals and locations, which frequently manifest in intriguing ways in her artistic endeavors. This work also depicts instances in which she witnessed devoted individuals embarking on long journeys to get water for the purpose of venerating their deity. The works intriguingly convey the devotion and journey, as men and women traverse the arduous way with their staff and vessel, striving for the ultimate goal of receiving the blessings of their god. In a country such as India, religious belief is deeply ingrained

throughout the socio-cultural fabric of country. Meera, in her distinctive manner, crafts captivating human figures where the kunwars or poles accentuate through the rhythmic contours of the figures, which are then combined to make an intriguing coherent constellation. Meera Mukherjee, through her practice, was not only able to gauge the gap between art and craft but also resonated with the lives and accounts that she had observed and experienced that tell the story of mundanity, struggle, beauty, nature, history, and an unquenchable thirst for a creative life.



Fig.4: *Pilgrims to Haridwar, bronze, Meera Mukherjee (Image Courtesy: pundoles.com)*

The selection of material and media by Meera Mukherjee elicits a palpable quality that amplifies the emotive essence of the artwork. The process of meticulously crafting a wax sculpture and subsequently casting it in bronze is arduous and time-consuming. The active participation of the artists is essential in this process, resulting in a final product that reflects a sensory and tactile sensitivity, which is inherent to the entire process. Mukherjee actively participated in molding and fostering the materials and medium of her artworks, resulting in a unique embodiment that surpassed the traditional notion of figurative depiction commonly seen in modern sculpture. The sinuous shapes and smooth curves

of her sculpture convey a style that surpasses conventional anatomical standards yet represents a delicate physicality that is also cerebral in essence. The artist employed a hybrid visual language that fused elements of modern and folk art, necessitating a more meticulous and discerning interpretation of her visual idiom.

Material surface, organic semblance of forms, and their methodological implications played a major role in Meera Mukherjee's practice, as they did in the works of Novera Ahmed. The persona of Novera Ahmed in the context of Bangladesh's art is filled with enigmatic facets blended with a penchant for art and life coherence and a liberated spirit for taking creative stances that shaped the life and practice of the artist. Novera Ahmed is considered to be one of the most significant and radical figures in the modern art of Bangladesh as well as in the South Asian subcontinent. She was able to create a language that responded to the ideas and elements of the West but also evoked the experiences of her country's own context. Ahmed was trained in the premier institutes of the West under the guidance of artists like Karel Vogel and Venturino Venturi. Her works have a diverse style that stems from her constant experimentation with various materials, methods, and sculptural idioms.

Her initial exploration of sculptural form was shaped by European modern artists, including Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, and Pablo Picasso. According to critic Mustafa Zaman, Novera Ahmed skillfully combined local and international aesthetic ideas in her work, which introduced a new approach to art in Bangladesh and can also be considered as the advancement of indigenous art or vernacular modernism(Zaman, n.d.). Novara mostly used cement as her media of choice, skilfully manipulating it to build sculptures

that blend contemporary components with indigenous influences. Her work often references commonplace themes; for example, The artwork titled as "composition" (fig.5) is made of cement, yet its surface and modulation suggest the delicate qualities of stone. The sculpture consists of two seated figures representing a couple cradling their children. The artist deftly plays with the proportions of the figures, resulting in a captivating visual effect that adds a sense of dynamism to the artwork. The figuration is similar to the traditional "tepa putul,"(fig.6) or clay dolls, that are made with clay pinching popularly found in various regions of Bengal (in both India and Bangladesh).



Fig.5 & 6 : *Composition, Cement, Novera Ahmed, tepa putul (Image Courtesy: Bengal Institute, Brihatta Art Foundation)*

Novera Ahmed's life is replete with eccentric and intriguing experiences. Nearly one third of her life has been dedicated to traversing the globe, exploring various cultures and societies absorbing diverse elements into her life and artistic endeavors. She left Dhaka in the late 1960s never to return, and moved to France, where she lived until her last days. Perhaps the reason behind it was, as the eminent artist and scholar Lala Rukh Salim points out, "...the difficulty of pursuing an independent lifestyle and an innovative art form in a prohibitive social

environment, and secondly the disappointment of not gaining appreciation from other contemporary artists, which felt like injustice to her identity as an artist."(Tipu, n.d.).

While her primary focus was on cement, she also ventured into working with other materials such as bronze, clay, and the wreckage of crashed airplanes. 'Once in America', created in 1968-69 (fig.7), is an artwork from a series that was made using remnants from US air force planes discovered in Vietnam. This work showcases her fascination with found material and her keen political awareness. Unlike her other works, it possesses a distinct historical and thematic connection to the Vietnam War. In her work there is a sense of physicality that she had extensively explored, where her interaction with different medium and material plays an important role in shaping her artworks. Though highly proficient in working with conventional materials like cement, bronze, and clay, her innovative approach towards other materials and found objects exudes a sense of haptic and material sensibility that imbues her visual language with a powerful combination of aesthetic and conceptual significance.



Fig.7: *Once in America, U.S.A. Airplane debris, Novera Ahmed (Image Courtesy: Depart Magazine)*

As art scholar Shakawat Tipu writes, Novera's uniqueness lies in the ways she merged indigenous and avant-garde elements, "However the archaic quality plumbed by Novera separates her from her European counterpart. Perhaps the static yet culturally potent objects – the clay dolls of the region – made her resign to a line of creation which resided in between her learning from Europe and an understanding of her own context." (Tipu, n.d.)

Novera Ahmed and Meera Mukherjee, who are both pioneers in their respective fields, have successfully developed their own unique artistic styles that greatly enrich the modern art scene of Bengal, transcending national boundaries. Their artworks demonstrate distinct materiality and techniques that are both unique and effectively combine global and local influences, challenging the hierarchical distinction between art and craft, modern and indigenous. They express both physical and intellectual sensibility through their visual language.

The Discourse on Identity, Existence and Material-Artworks of Mithu Sen and Dilara Begum Jolly

The practice that Meera Mukherjee and Novera Ahmed had developed created new avenues for the later generations of women artists who have been able to explore new possibilities in art that dealt with issues and ideas pertinent to their contemporary context. Mithu Sen and Dilara Begum Jolly, who belong to different generations and contexts but are equally responsive and bold in their artistic practice, have been able to cause commotion in contemporary art.

Women artists in India have been involved in the development of distinct art practices that embody unconventional material-based language. After India's economic liberalization in the 1990s(Ciotti

2012), which opened new avenues for Indian artists and art institutions⁴. The art practice pioneered by female artists is a significant shift from the earlier approaches of modern art in India, which emphasized the freedom and diversity in adopting various, unconventional mundane, industrial, and flexible materials. By employing varied materials and techniques, female artists were able to distinguish their artistic approach, encapsulating their societal, cultural, gender, and creative identities, from that of their male counterparts.

“My medium is life – human experiences. In my practice, the cognitive and sensory projections in the form of life and human experiences are the actual material that produces my art.”(A. Kumar 2019) Says Mithu Sen about her work and process. In order to trace the origins and progression of non-traditional material-based artistic techniques employed by women artists in India, Mithu Sen's artwork significantly contributes to the comprehension and navigation of post-liberalized India's contemporary art scene. Her selection and usage of materials like hair, teeth, dental polymers, and found objects are implicit with conceptual and political connotations that refer to gender, sexuality, and society in a very distinctive manner. Her works also involve new media and performance art as important mediums, which helps in understanding the choices and shifts the artist has made away from the conventional ways of representing social and political ideas in art.

Mithu Sen's thought-provoking artworks, such as 'No Star, No Land, No Word, No Commitment' and 'Border Unseen', employ experimental materials and possess a unique visual concept.

⁴ *Institutions include not only art schools, but also galleries, non-profit organizations, and other spaces that promoted and supported contemporary art in India after liberalization.*

These artworks not only explore conceptual ideas but also provoke critical questions about society and identity. An intriguing work titled "No star, no land, no word, no commitment" (figure 8,9) was produced between 2004-2014; it consists of manipulated synthetic hair to prompt contemplation on linguistic boundaries that transcend national and provincial borders. Sen's piece offers an intriguing critique of the hierarchical structure of linguistic debates. She accomplishes this by creating a wall-mounted installation that features a quasi-language, which appears to resemble a particular dialect but is imaginative.

She incites the audience to engage in the process of decoding an unfamiliar language. She endeavors to comprehend the psychological aspects underlying the act of assigning meaning to things that are unfamiliar within one's own cultural context. The conscious incorporation of hair in the creation of these pseudo-alphabets leads to a profound alteration of the fundamental nature of the material, resulting in a unique identity that is closely linked to the body and the senses. This produces a sensory association through the tactile sensitivity associated with hair in general, resulting in a complex and multi-faceted experience for the observer.

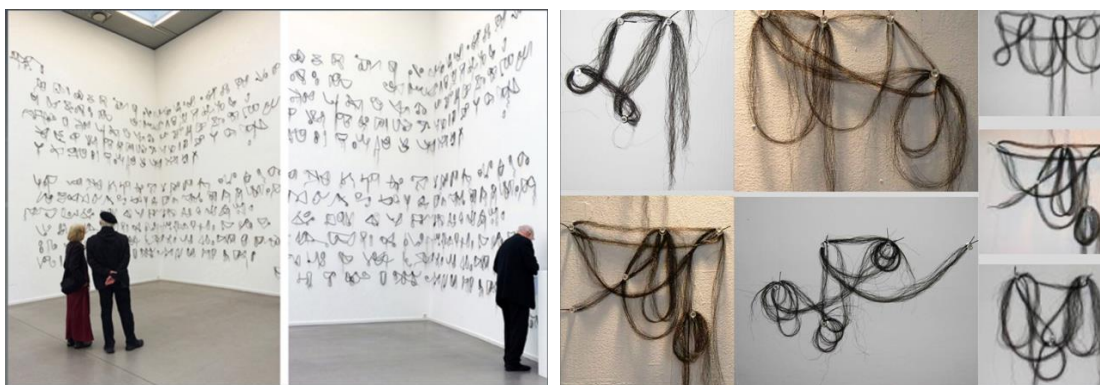
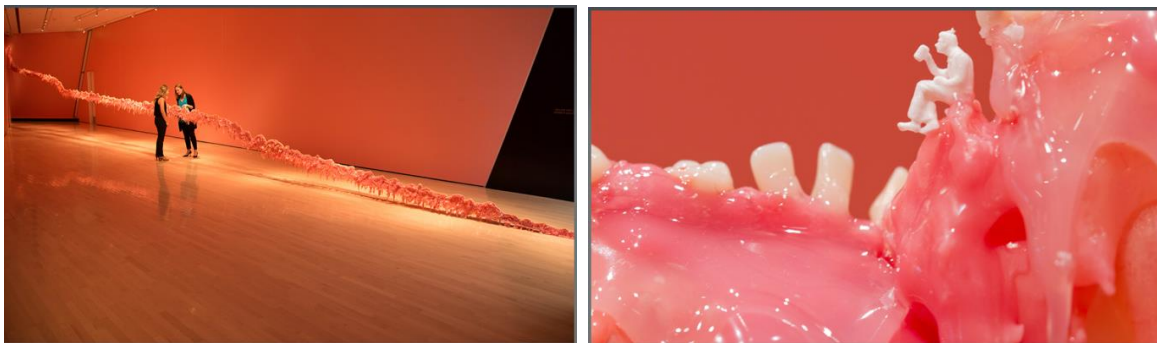


Fig.8 & 9: 'No Star, No Land, No Word, No Commitment', artificial hair, 2004-2014, Mithu Sen (Image Courtesy: Mithu Sen)

In her artwork, titled "Border Unseen" (fig.10,11) from 2014, she aims to explore the concept of a border, including its physical nature, historical significance, and geopolitical and ontological implications. The artists deliberately constructed this 82-foot-long irregular dental polymer sculptural installation to divide the gallery space⁵ in half, thereby enabling the viewer to traverse the area in a peculiar fashion. Incorporating an additional stratum of significance into the piece, Sen constructs an uninterrupted line endowed with corporeal qualities owing to the texture and hue of the material. Embedded inside the polymer matrix are little figurines and artificial teeth that exude the whimsical, erotic, and characteristically sensitive wit of the artist. The audience is forced to submerge themselves beneath the structure in order to navigate the border, which creates a critical interaction that subtly evokes ideas related to the segregation of space/land through a cartographic line.



**Fig.10 & 11 : *Border Unseen, Polymer gum, artificial teeth, found object,2014*
Mithu Sen (Image Courtesy: Mithu Sen)**

This line represents the complex historical trajectory of migration from different parts of the world. The installation's physicality and monumentality enable viewers to experience the concept of boundaries and how they restrict human movement and enclose a space where geographical features, societies, and cultures are

⁵ *The gallery space was designed by the famous architect Zaha Hadid, where Mithu Sen's installation creates a critical intervention.*

also confined; they are all constrained to a significant degree by the borders that regulate and restrict human interaction. The border is a conceptual construct devised by human society based on imperialistic principles of power hierarchy, which holds great importance in the global geopolitics. Mithu Sen questions the concept of imperialism and the hierarchical system that restricts and limits human freedom of movement. As she states, the ideas behind her works are more important to her than the actual, concrete objects; rather, they represent the results of her thought process and life experiences. Her art exhibits a tactile quality that serves as a conduit for her conceptual and aesthetic ideas.

The observant, curious, and responsive nature of Dilara Begum Jolly creates a distinctive art practice that is deeply embedded in her socio-political context. Jolly, like Mithu, uses an array of materials and media that help her construct her artistic language, which addresses various ideas and issues related to social, cultural, and political structures. Her conscious and sensitive selves try to navigate through the historical trajectories of Bangladesh and locate the injustice and agony that people, especially women, have faced. The plight and agony of 'Biranganas', (the women war heroins of the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971), have been the locus of many of her works. Dilara Begum Jolly says in an interview,

"The realities of being a woman has always been my preoccupation, but it has been over a decade since I began to critically engage with the vulnerability of women vis a vis times of war. War leaves its indelible marks on their body and more insidiously on their psyche, specially the trauma that relentlessly haunt and irreversibly transforms the lives of war victims. For

obvious reasons, my enquiry homed in on the victims of the Bangladesh's Liberation War of 1971."(R. Kumar 2020)



Fig.12: Alor Stambha, , New Media, 2020 Dilara Begum Jolly (Image Courtesy: Stir World)

Her seminal works on the Biranganas, 'Alor Stambha' or 'Parables of Womb', 2020 (fig.12) bring out the anguish and tragedy of the Biranganas, who were victims of severe sexual violence by the Pakistani army in 1971. The piece titled 'Alor Stambha' an installation piece that consists of ten images of Biranganas's portraits that are mounted to a light box. The portraits are pierced with countless needle punctures that act as a conduit between the light within the box and the darkness outside. The needle marks and the painstaking process are a metaphor for the pain and suffering that women had to go through during the war. The piece highlights the fragility of women in conflict, as they not only lose their lives and those of their families but also their integrity due to the terrible abuse, they endure during the war.

Dilara Begum Jolly's recent artistic creations delve into the indigenous traditions of Nakshi Kantha embroidery in a unique way that imbues her creations with a contextual and critical dimension. The 'Deher Akhyan', 2020 (fig.13) series is a collection

of artwork that the artist created during the period of pandemic lockdown. This body of work explores the intersection of existential anxiety and the concept of gender identity and other different critical connotations. The artworks are made out of manipulated female undergarments punctuated with running stitch and pricked needles, producing a corporeal form that resembles a suspended cadaver. The act of stitching and leaving the needle pierced in the pieces, resembling wound marks, is a continuation of her previous needle punctures that adopt a more corporeal form. This work questions the male gaze and the objectification of women in society through various media, as if these objectifications were embodied in the corporeal body of these sculptures via such marks.



Fig.13: Deher Akhyan, Mixed Media, 2020, Dilara Begum Jolly (Image Courtesy: Promiti Hossain)

Dilara creates a mutilated form that critiques the societal perception of female sexuality and physicality in order to address

the problematic scrutiny and judgment that women often encounter, which even permeates their garments. These artworks raise the issue of privacy and how it is degraded by the mass media, resulting in the objectification of the female body and the inciting of sexual desire in a perverse manner. These sculpture forms, devoid of any anatomical details, transport the viewer to an experiential realm with psychological implications by evoking a physicality that is the antithesis of any desirable objectification.

Mithu Sen and Dilara Begum Jolly both explore subjects, materials, and methods that are intertwined with social, cultural, and political concerns, and they both place human experiences at the center, where both physical and psychological consciousness is at work. The contexts are different, as are the historical and personal trajectories, but the works tend to talk about the universal human condition and existence, where space, time, and borders diminish.

Conclusion

As is evident from the discourse, female artists hailing from both sides of Bengal on this subcontinent in South Asia have cultivated unique artistic methodologies that have not only introduced novel artistic possibilities but also engendered fresh perspectives on the human condition. Across many generations of artists, they have delved into distinct languages and forms while maintaining an inherent connection to their roots. The choice of material and media significantly influences the artistic expression of the artists, as they have extensively explored and experimented multiple possibilities. The works of Meera Mukherjee, Novera Ahmed, and Dilara Begum Jolly incorporate indigenous traditions, implicitly or explicitly. These artists incorporate new aesthetic and material sensibilities into the visual languages of indigenous idioms,

expanding the horizon beyond the scope of their original forms. Various materials were cultivated in diverse dimensions that elicit personal, political, and psychological significance. On the other hand, the works of Mithu Sen, in which the presence of hair, artificial gum, and teeth alludes to both personal and political connotations, emphasized the susceptibility of inflexible societal structures and established notions.

Unfortunately, there is a dearth of research and art historical literature on the creative processes of these significant modern and contemporary South Asian artists. The presence of women in academia and museums is similarly constrained. While the impact of these women artists on the development of modern and contemporary art is significant, there is a lack of comprehensive critical analysis on their art practices, as well as those of other important women artists in the South Asian subcontinent, with only a few textual sources available. The concern regarding the inadequate representation of women across different institutions was initially raised by the feminist movement in the West sixty years ago. Progressively, this movement exerted an impact on the art world, compelling major publications and museums to allocate more emphasis to the artistic practices of female artists. However, the situation remains problematic in the subcontinent of South Asia, where further scholarly investigation and critical dialogue are required to establish fresh conversations regarding modern and contemporary art. Within the limited scope of this essay, the discussion briefly alludes to the practice of few female artists, there are undoubtedly numerous others whose works demand further investigation and exploration in the art historical discourse.

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