

**Female Artists in Sri Lanka:
Problems of Representation of the Female Subject and Issues of Agency¹**

Sasanka Perera
Department of Sociology
University of Colombo

“Living *in* a female body is different from looking *at* it, as a man. Even the Venus of Urbino menstruated, as women know and men forget” (Tickner 1987: 266).

Introduction

In this paper I would primarily attempt to deal with two issues. The first issue deals with the dynamics and politics of artistic production of female or women artists in Sri Lanka. The second issue is directly linked to the concerns of the first and is linked to the problems in the manner in which they represent women or the female subject in their artistic output. In addition to the aesthetics of the female figure, I am also interested here in the meanings that are inscribed on that figure, and hence the representation of the female subject itself. Of course in the process of investigating these issues I will have to look into the positions and conventions of male-centric artistic production in Sri Lanka as well. By the term artist here I mean mostly painters and to a lesser extent sculptors.

A further clarification of my analytical interests and an expansion of the two issues I have identified above would suggest that I am also interested in issues of agency of these women artists. More clearly, I am interested in their agency in constructing and perpetuating certain representations of the female figure and subject and their ability or failure to transform the manner in which that subject has been constructed and reproduced in Sri Lankan art for a considerable period of time. I am also concerned here with the ways in which notions of femininity and particularly what “kind of femininity” can be, and has been represented in art, as art in Sri Lanka, and the manner in which such established dominant images have continued from the past.

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At the same time, I am not an artist or an art critic. My discussion in the following pages is the somewhat incomplete culmination of observations I have made, thoughts that have come to my mind and nuances and knowledge that have come from many conversations I have had with individuals linked to various art circles in Colombo over the last four years as part of a personal journey that I had to take. But it was a journey embarked upon quite willingly not only because I was interested in art, but also because I share much of my time and life with one of those women artists. What follows then is both an empirical anthropological narrative in the conventional sense as well as an interrogation of certain theoretical formulations in order to contextualize this narrative.

In Search of a Lineage: Representation of the Female Subject in Sri Lankan Art

It seems reasonable to initiate this analysis by interrogating the manner in which the female figure has generally been represented in Sri Lankan art, whether by male or female artists, and also to ascertain its historical continuity. The best known female figures from ancient Sri Lankan paintings come from the images in the 5th century rock fortress of Sigiriya where a series of female torsos have been painted by an unknown artist or artists on a rock face specially prepared for painting, perhaps for the sensual pleasures of King Kasyapa and the members of his royal court. In general archaeological reckoning Kasyapa is credited with turning Sigiriya, previously a mere regional settlement and military outpost into a fortress as well as a pleasure garden. The Sigiriya frescoes also represent some of the very few painted images of women not constructed within a religious idiom. They are clearly represented in an extremely sensuous and erotic manner. They are figures to be gazed at, figures at whose beauty men are supposed to be amazed, and even fall in love with. In fact, after Sigiriya went into disuse, generations of visitors have written hundreds of graffiti over hundreds of years, among other things commenting on the beauty and sensuousness of the women of Sigiriya. In addition, the female imagery constructed in the Sinhala *sandesh* poetry (eg., *Hansa Sandeshaya*), particularly in the Kotte Period is also presented in much the same sensuous manner. This particular image of women as sensuous and erotic objects to be gazed at, is one dominant image that will confront us repeatedly in latter day Sri Lankan art as well.

The other major sources of female figures in ancient Sri Lankan art are the remnants of temple paintings which are clearly set within a religious paradigm. The earliest remaining paintings date from the Kandyan period. They are presented in a relatively passive idiom -- offering flowers, being offered as alms by a Bodhisattva to an old Brahman, wives of Bodhisattvas, and so on. This passivity and apparent lack of agency is yet another dominant image of the female that would also confront us in latter day Sri Lankan art. However, by making these observations I do not intend to argue for a clear and unilinear case of continuity in the manner in which female subject has been represented in Sri Lankan art. But I do want to make the point that when this issue is discussed, we cannot completely remove the presence of the past from the present. Surely, such images must make part of our collective memory and consciousness, particularly due to the invasions post-colonial archaeology and historiography have made into our minds and imagination through socialization, media and school curricula.

However, it was not Kasyapa's unknown fifth century painters or the post Kandyan period temple painters who assured the continuity of the twin images I have referred to above into the present. That was part and parcel of a truly modernist project -- the *avant garde* intervention of the 43 Group. The 43 Group (which was initiated in 1943) consisted of a group of city-based upper and middle class male artists (mostly painters) from different ethnic and religious backgrounds who managed to change the direction of Sri Lankan art. They consisted of painters such as Justin Deraniyagala, Ivan Peries, Aubrey Collette, George Keyt, L.T.P Manjusri and others. All of them were in different ways exposed to the influences and dynamics of European art of their time, particularly visible in the cubist and expressionist images they introduced into Sri Lankan art. Their work also created a new genre of much more freer and relaxed forms of artistic expression as opposed to the tighter and more academic art represented by such individuals as A.C.G.S Amarasekera.

As a collectivity of influential artists, the 43 Group also made a major impact on the manner in which they represented the female figure in their paintings, which I would suggest continues to-date. In many of their work, the female figure was represented as a slim, sensuous, passive and sometimes erotic image. This particular construct of the female was not only influenced by memories of

Sigiriya, but was also inspired by the mythic narratives from Hinduism and epics such as *Mahabharata*. Among others, George Keyt's female figures most clearly represent this trend (Dharmasiri 1988: 20-35, Goonasekera 1991).² The fact that Keyt was the most influential Sri Lankan artist of this century must also be borne in mind here. As far as Keyt's work is concerned, his female figures went far beyond the mere sensuous to traverse a rather elaborate realm of the erotic. Moreover, this kind of representation of the female body in his work has been consistent from the 1920s to his death in the early 1990s. Comparatively, Ivan Peries, another well known artist of the 43 Group was not as obsessed as Keyt was with the kind of paradigmatic representation of the female body so closely associated with Keyt (Bandaranayake and Fonseka 1996). But whenever he did paint women, particularly in the 1940s and up to the early 1960s, they were also close to nature, bathing in rivers, apparently care free, slim and so on.³ In addition, as I have already noted, these artists were exposed to contemporary dynamics of European art and were familiar with the dominant themes of modernism in general. This assured that the prevailing European attitudes towards the representation of the female figure in art as a modernist preoccupation had also become part of their own imagination. Thus the ability to master the female figure, particularly the female nude or semi-nude was important to the artists of the 43 group and those that followed them. Painter and sculptor Anoli Perera in a recent lecture summarized this European attitude towards the female figure in the following words:

“By the end of the 19th century, in popular myth and artistic practices the division between the male artist and the female nude was clearly entrenched. The perceived nature of the woman as passionate and her character ruled by unreflective emotion of love and hate than clear reasoning and her natural tendency to please and be subjected automatically places her within the concepts of objectification. Thereby she becomes the object for the gaze. The male artist assumes the position of the master of the gaze who is vested with scopic

² For example, see his work *Recumbent Nude*, 1928, *Flower Offering*, 1927, *Kandyan Portrait*, 1927, *Two Women*, 1933, *Viharamaha Devi*, 1936, *Maithuna*, 1936, *Jhula*, 1936, *Rati*, 1936, *Sivasoka*, 1938, *Kacha and Devayani*, 1943, *Gleaners*, 1957, *Girl with Mirror*, 1957, *Artist with Muse*, 1963, *Radha and Krishna*, 1974, *Giving her Flowers*, 1976, *Tilottama*, 1976 (Goonasekera 1991: 27-124).

³ For example, see his work *The Beloved*, 1949, *The well*, 1957, *The Eclipse*, 1957-58, *Reclining Nude*, 1949, *Girl with Flowers*, 1949, *The River*, 1946-47, *The Beach*, 1948, *The Bathers*, 1949, *Thambakke*, 1961 (Bandaranayake and Fonseka 1996).

authority which is normative in western thought. Another aspect of this objectification of women in art production is that the powers of male artist's creativity and innovations are derived from the successful depiction of erotic, passive female nudes (Perera 1997).

This kind of sexual objectification was especially evident among early modernist artists. The best known work which represent this trend are Gauguin's so called primitives, Matisse's nudes, and Manet's and Picasso's prostitutes (Perera 1997). Moreover, Chadwick notes that the kind of works referred to above which are closely associated with the development of modern art "wrest their formal and stylistic innovations from an erotically based assault on female form" (Chadwick 1996: 279). Moreover, Chadwick further argues that modern artists from Renoir to Picasso have contributed towards merging the sexual and artistic by realms by equating "artistic creation with male sexual energy, presenting women as powerless and sexually subjugated" (Chadwick 1996: 279 - 280). Similarly, Carol Duncan talking about sexualizing of creativity by the German Expressionists and Cubists in her essay *Domination and Virility in Vanguard Painting* argues that in much of such work the female figure is reduced to flesh and rendered powerless before the artist or viewer where her body "contorted according to the dictates of his erotic will" (Quoted in Chadwick 1996: 280).

In the Sri Lankan context it is perhaps Keyt who most completely imitated these trends and played a significant role in institutionalizing them within Sri Lankan art in an influential manner. On the other hand, in the context of these multiple influences, the 43 Group also transported an idealized image of the village, particularly the Sinhala village, and its women into the living rooms of the contemporary urban elites. In such representations, the harshness, poverty and violence of rural Sri Lanka was not to be seen. In their paintings, the village became a beautiful place or a kind of Garden of Eden, with green paddy fields, luxurious rivers, fields of flowers, mud huts, bullock carts and so on. In the midst of this beauty equally beautiful women carried pots of water showing off their midriffs, collected flowers for the temple, and often they possessed full breasts, tall slender bodies, curved hips and other attributes of ideal women -- in the perception and imagination of the members of the 43 Group. This idealization of reconstructed rural female figures, female images from the Hindu mythic traditions and memories of Sigiriya and temple paintings together constructed the

twin images of the female as sensuous and passive, and nothing in between or beyond these images. But clearly, the equation of the female, quite literally with nature in these representations came from the far reaching influences of modernism.

Another important aspect of this particular type of representation has to be understood and located in the context of the Sri Lankan independence movement which in its self was also a predominantly urban based middle class movement, particularly with regard to its leaders. As a matter of fact, the painters of the 43 Group and the leaders of the independence movement came from the same elite social backgrounds. Sri Lanka did gain her political independence in 1948, and the reigns of power were handed over to the representatives of the above class group by the British. I would argue that in the context of this independence movement and its euphoria, there was also a need to create a certain kind of ideal Sri Lankan (Ceylonese at that time) cultural identity, particularly in painting, drama, literature and so on. The relative renaissance in these fields in the post 1940s period (which lasted until the 1960s) is a result of this interest. Part of this identity creation was based on re-inventing the past, and its idealization as well as the glorification of what was perceived as rural and pure as opposed to the urban and impure.

In so far as painting was concerned, there arose a need to create an ideal Sri Lankan identity or image. The village, its alleged harmony and its perceivably beautiful women all became part of this conscious political and cultural project. It is however, important to note that this was mostly an idealization of the Sinhala village. It is no accident that despite the varied ethno-religious backgrounds of its members, there were no Tamils or Muslims in the 43 Group. Interestingly, the members of this group, even though far removed from the realities of the Sinhala village and its women, essentially created this kind of ideal female subject based on their specific exposure to norms of European art at the time as well as based on their almost total lack of routine experience with the kind of imagery they were producing on canvas. The absence of experience was compensated by a collective imagination that allowed them to draw from European norms of beauty as well as standards of beauty from Hindu epics and memories of Sigiriya.

What I am suggesting is that this essentially male initiated representation of female subject is what is dominant in the images of female figures even in contemporary art, as typified by the syrupy representations of village “beauty” and passive sensuousness of women in the work of Senaka Senanayake⁴ (Senanayake, no date). But this is not something restricted merely to contemporary male artists such as Senanayake, but extends to the work of well known women painters as well. If we take as examples, the current work of Iromi Wijewardena and Marie Alles Fernando, it is this idealized image of the female handed down to us by the 43 Group that stare at us from their canvases with an ever present smile: dancers, water carriers, women carrying flowers, women carrying babies, women smiling, women selling vegetables in the Sunday fair, women bathing, women washing clothes in the stream, and so on. In the female images of these two senior women painters, there is no pain, no ugliness, or even the messiness that is so typical of human life everywhere. These are quite simply images of sensuous women if not erotic, betraying no sense of agency but merely there to please the eyes and satisfy the desires of those who gaze, most often men -- the very creators of this particular type of imagery.

In Theory: Exploring the General Foundations of the Dominant Representations of the Female Figure

Perhaps it would be useful to pose a few questions at this point and attempt to understand, why the female figure has been represented in the visual arts in the way it has been, not only in Sri Lanka but elsewhere as well. Such an exploration, given its seemingly universal applicability, cannot merely be based on cultural explanations specific to different varieties of human groups, but on a broader theoretical level that may be able to explain certain aspects of human behavior in general. As such, such an exploration will not necessarily be limited to a single issue like the representation of the female figure in art, but would also include more encompassing issues such as how notions of femininity and masculinity are constructed at a fundamental level of human perception. Sigmund Freud, raising the question “what is woman?” attempts to answer it by using an imagery of light and darkness, which as Irigaray argues shows Freud’s

⁴ For example, see his work *In Harmony*, 1995, *Sugar Cane Worker*, 1994, *At the Well*, 1977, *Women and Peacock*, 1995, *Woman and Elephant*, 1993, *By the Stream*, 1992, *Banana Grove*, 1969 *Study in Blue*, 1978 (Senanayake, no date).

subservience to the oldest of existing phallogocentric philosophical traditions (Moi 1985: 132). Freudian theory attempting to explain the difference between male and female, takes as its point of departure the *visibility* of difference. That is, what is ultimately true and what is not, is based on what the eyes can see (Moi 1985: 132). In terms of this kind of theorizing, what is important to Freud in explaining sexual difference is the fact that the male has a visible sex organ, the penis, which the woman does not have. Thus as Moi has pointed out, when Freud looks at the woman, he sees nothing (Moi 1985: 132). In other words, Freudian theory suggests that female difference has to be perceived in the context of an absence or negation of the male norm.

Thus one could argue that as far as Freud is concerned, there can be no female existence in a context where man does not exist. As Freud has argued, in the pre-Oedipal stage from oral, through anal to phallic phases, there is no sexual difference. It is only at the moment of Oedipal crisis and later, that such difference begins to manifest. It is in this context that Irigaray has commented that Freud has succumbed to the specular logic of the same, and sees only a male image even in the female, or has framed boys as the same as girls (Moi 1985: 132-133). According to Freud, in the phallic stage, the clitoris is perceived by little girls as an inferior penis. Such arguments have been identified by feminist writers such as Moi as Freud's suppression of intrusion of difference into his reflection (Moi 1985: 133). It is then this visual perception of a *lack* or *deficiency* that is the driving force behind the Freudian notion of penis envy (Moi 1985, Brennan 1992).

If we assume for a moment, that Freud may have been correct -- at least to some extent -- in the formulations outlined above, then it means that in human perception the female is a lesser human person. Or in other words, given her lack of a penis, she has not achieved the ultimate biological "gift" a human being can have -- to be a man. If this is the way the human mind is formatted to think, then there is hardly any surprise in the way the female figure is usually represented in art, advertisements, media and so on. Moreover, the same logic could extend to the manner in which over the years power relations between men and women have been perceived and played out in all societies -- except under exceptional circumstances. The woman, without any agency, passive, to be looked at and so on.

At this point, I would also like to briefly outline yet another Freudian formulation that may also be useful to this discussion. That is the notion of man's castration fear. Freud argues that all men at the level of the unconscious entertain a fear of being castrated. In the context of this castration fear or anxiety, the image of the woman with her lack of a penis symbolizes that fear. Here:

“--- women are no more than puppets; their significance lies purely in their lack of penis and their star turn is to symbolize the castration which men fear”
(Mulvey 1985: 130).

Mulvey further argues that Freud's analysis of the male unconscious is particularly significant in understanding the varied ways in which the female “form has been used as a mould into which meaning have been poured by a male-dominated culture” (Mulvey 1985: 130). In recent times, feminist writers such as Irigaray and Kate Millett have re-read Freud's ideas on penis envy and castration fear. They suggest that notions of penis envy is a projection of male castration fear, which means that if the woman envies a male penis, then he must surely have one. Stated more simply, the function of female penis envy is to bolster the male psyche (Moi 1985: 133, Brennan 1992). Once again, if these formulations are correct, then the logic is that the way in which women are perceived and represented in art and elsewhere make further sense. If the image of the woman reminds the man of his fear of castration, then ideally her image has to be represented in art and other media in a male dominated socio-cultural setting in a way that would allow him to forget his fear and anxiety.

In exploring this issue, I would like to refer to a 1973 review of the work of painter and sculptor Allen Jones by Laura Mulvey. Jones had a high artistic reputation for his paintings and sculptures of women in erotic, startling and fantastic images and poses. In the review she argued that Jones' work symbolized not only the way he perceived women, but also the place they occupy in the male consciousness in general (Mulvey 1985: 127). Her main argument was that the images Jones created had a clear pattern along with a specific visual vocabulary and grammar which in the end constitute an imagery of fetishism (Mulvey 1985: 127-128). Fetishism, according to Freud is the displacement of the sight of woman's imaginary castration onto numerous other objects which symbolizes the

lost penis even though they may not be directly connected with it. For the fetishist the sign or symbol itself is the subject of his fantasy (Mulvey 1985: 130). Jones' work as pointed out by Mulvey is replete with phallic imagery as well as the concealment of female vaginal areas (1985: 127- 131). Mulvey interprets this as Jones' own fear of castration which he attempts to overcome by concealing female vaginal parts reinforced by re-occurring phallic imagery in his work (Mulvey 1985: 127-131).

Mulvey's project was not merely to place in context the work of Jones but also to extend the specific arguments about his work to encompass the ways in which men perceive the female body. It is then in this general framework that Mulvey's review may shed some light on the way female figure has been represented in art. One could argue, that fetishist tendencies do not have to manifest only in the ways evident in Jones' work. If the idea here is to overcome the male castration anxiety by displacing the sight of woman's imaginary castration, this can be achieved in a numerous other ways by the maneuvering and exploiting available aesthetic paradigms and visual languages. Thus women, in passive imagery betraying a relative lack of agency would suite quite well man's need to feel secure and powerful in a situation of the unconscious marked by the kinds of fears and anxieties outlined above.

It seems to me that at this point one also needs to pay attention to Freud's idea of the *gaze* as a phallic activity. He associates the act of seeing to anal activity, which he suggests expresses a desire for the mastery over one's libidinal objects. This desire later underlies the phallic or Oedipal fantasies about phallic or masculine power. Framed in this fashion the gaze formulates the voyeur's desire for sadistic power, where the object of the gaze is cast as its passive, masochistic feminine victim (Moi 1985: 134, 180). Again seen from this perspective, the ways in which the female image has been represented and perceived everywhere as an object to be gazed at, desired, to be mastered and controlled fits into place.

What I have tried to outline above is to place in context the possibility of the fact that the manner in which femininity is perceived and later represented in various forms have a certain universal applicability based on human nature. But, that does not mean that culture of a specific location plays no role in this matter. As a matter of fact, culture often reinforces these representations. On the other hand,

culture is also the realm where such representations can be problematized, and contested.

Passive Mothers and Erotic Women: Continuing Images of the Female Subject in Sri Lankan Art

At this point it is perhaps necessary to pose the question as to why the kind of images I have outlined earlier in this paper seem to predominate or rather perpetuate in Sri Lankan art. That question needs to be posed together with the following question: why is there a clear lack of agency in these women painters and in what they paint? In the theoretical exploration above, I have attempted to partially answer the first of these questions by framing it within the Freudian psychoanalytic theory and recent feminist critiques of it. But such general explanations are inadequate to probe into issues of representation and their politics in specific socio-cultural sites which have their own dynamics and politics. However, even socio-culturally speaking, these are not issues restricted merely to Sri Lankan art. In fact, these issues have emerged at different points in time, and have been dealt with in different ways in the evolution of cultural history in many parts of the world. In talking about the late 19th century and early 20th century art in Europe and Germany in particular, Anoli Perera argues that the kind of mastery of the female nude referred to earlier, was extremely important in the process of establishing one's artistic identity. In this context she suggests that women artists were confronted with the problem of reconciling their own identities, first as artists and then as women (Perera 1997). I would suggest that this argument would partly explain the perpetuation of the male constructed female image by women artists in Sri Lanka. On the other hand, they are still working in a predominantly patriarchal world where they lack the kind of institutional support networks and ideological sustenance that would help them break away from these images and trends.

With reference to modernist painting, Chadwick has pointed out, there was also a tendency to identify women with nature and to imagine femininity in terms of its instinctive, enigmatic, sexual, and destructive aspects which tended to place women artists "in an impossible double-bind in which femininity and art become self-cancelling phrases" (Chadwick 1996: 279). It seems to me that this rather

unenviable modernist situation also generally applies to the position occupied by women artists in contemporary Sri Lanka.

The other problem that one has to deal with here is the very stark reality that except for a handful of well-known women artists based in Colombo there is no community of women artists in Sri Lanka. Why this situation has come about will have to be framed within the problem of the lack of support networks and ideological support I raised above. Talking about the emergence of the feminist art movement in the United Kingdom, Parker and Pollock argue that the women's art movement emerged in the 1970s out of the dynamic women's movement that was making its presence felt since the 1960s. They also argue that the Women's Art Movement has remained closely aligned to the Women's Movement (Parker and Pollock 1987: 3). It was in this context that the Women's Liberation Art Group (founded in 1971) and the Artists' Union (founded in 1972) were formed, which began organizing exhibitions of women artists in different parts of London and elsewhere in England. This period also marked the attempts made by women's art groups in the United Kingdom to hold group exhibitions of women artists in venues that were then not recognized as legitimate exhibition spaces which gave them venues to do the kind of work they wanted and exhibit them without being held back by prevailing patriarchal social values and restrictions (Parker and Pollock 1987: 3-5, 15-19). Thus it was in this context that Swiss Cottage Library became a venue for women's and feminist art exhibitions, including the well known 1973 "Woman-power" exhibition by women artists such as Monica Sjoo, Ann Berg and others (Parker and Pollock 1987: 3-5). It was during this exhibition that Sjoo's painting "God giving birth" (1969, oil on canvas) depicting a women giving birth created much controversy and societal antagonism including threats of legal action on charges of blasphemy and obscenity (Parker and Pollock 1987: 3-6). It was in the context of such an intellectual and activist context that the dynamic women's art movement emerged not only in the United Kingdom but also elsewhere in Europe.

A similarly dynamic feminist art movement also emerged in North and Central America, Australia and elsewhere which were simultaneously protest groups as well as artists groups (Parker and Pollock 1987: 3-4, 15-19, Chadwick 1996: 355-377). In addition, the 1970s also marked the emergence of a women's art history tradition, particularly based in Western Europe and North America. This

tradition began perhaps with Linda Nochlin's essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" which was published in *Art News* in 1971 (Parker and Pollock 1987: 20). With the rapid expansion of feminist art history in these countries, major omissions in the standard art histories have been identified from a women's perspective, and placed in context (Parker and Pollock 1987: 20, Isaak 1996). Of course these developments were mostly within the Western European and American art and academic scenes. But in so far as those particular locations were concerned, these multiple developments allowed women not only to question and break away from male constructed imagery of women, but more significantly to mature and experiment as artists in their own right without the burden of patriarchal cultural values or ideals hampering their progress. Moreover, with the expansion of the women's movement and feminist art traditions, the female body became a site of confrontation and struggle in feminist politics (Pollock 1996: 6). It is no longer merely a site of exploitation.

Comparatively, these kinds of developments have not taken place in Sri Lankan art. Part of the problem is that the kind of dynamic women's movement in the European and North American sense did not emerge in Sri Lanka. In fact, such a movement still does not exist. What exists in Sri Lanka are a number of feminists and some organizations which they represent which have relative visibility in selected social realms in the cities. As a collective however, they do not have the dynamism, the roots, vision or the direction the movements briefly referred to above clearly had. The point then is that one cannot expect a feminist or women's art movement to emerge from such a disparate amalgamation of individuals and organizations which lack influence, intellectual coherence and reach. As such, one cannot expect from such a collective the kind of serious and wide-ranging interventions made by women in the fields of art and art history in Western Europe and North America. In a situation where no Sri Lankan feminist or women's group have regular access to a mass-circulating Sinhala or Tamil newspapers to engage in general debate or questioning, the kind of sustained interrogation of the manner in which the female figure is consistently represented in art, the position of women artists in Sri Lanka or any other related issues cannot be undertaken.

In addition to the lack of support networks, women artists in Sri Lanka also have to face serious socio-cultural hurdles that clearly disrupt their process of maturing

as artists and as thinkers within the art circles. In fact, there are only a very few full time women artists (clearly less than about 7 or so) holding regular exhibitions who have some kind of national recognition. Thus in sheer numbers alone they are a clear minority which also makes it extremely difficult to challenge the kind of traditions and conventions I have been discussing. This is particularly so in a situation where much needed institutional and ideological support is seriously lacking as is the case in Sri Lanka. It is in answering why there are so few women artists in this country that one would have to look to the dynamics of culture in search of some of the answers. It must be noted here that this situation exists despite the fact the majority of students who are taking courses in painting and sculpture at the Institute of Aesthetic Studies in Colombo are women. We also know that the large majority of them “successfully” graduate from the institute with degrees in fine art. Then, once they step into the wider society, they literally seem to disappear.

I would suggest that they disappear within strictly enforced gender roles, among which the sexual scripts governing the responsibilities of motherhood and wife predominate. In other words, their individual professional identity as women artists which would hardly have developed at the time of their graduation, do not get any space or impetus to expand within marriage and motherhood. Women are vested with or burdened with heavy series of responsibilities as the perceived primary socializers of society, nurturers of children and the wives of husbands (Perera 1996). In addition, male or female artists -- whether painters or sculptors -- are hardly recognized as a separate, independent and above all “respectable profession” unless they have achieved a standard of relative fame within the Colombo based minute art market. That situation also impacts negatively on women. It is generally perceived acceptable for them to become art teachers in schools because that particular vocation is framed within the idiom of a “teacher” and not as an “artist.” Artists in popular perception are also perceived as a marginal community: not affluent, strange and in general not ideal citizens. Given the fact that women are perceived to be the ideal socializers of society, it is unlikely that they as mothers and wives would be encouraged to be associated with life styles or professions popularly not seen as ideal.

On the other hand, even if they attempt to continue their profession within the realms of marriage and motherhood, domestic responsibilities do not allow them

to spend adequate time on artistic endeavors required to mature as artists, both technically and intellectually. This situation most clearly manifests within families where both husband and wife have had a training in art. Let me present as an example the cases of two well-known male artists whom I know. They belong to two different generations. Their teachers and friends with whom I have had conversations, often observed that the two women were far better artists as students than the men were. In fact, most people who come to the exhibitions of the two men do not even know of the two women either as artists or as individuals. They are in the domestic sphere, in the kitchen and with their children, so that the husbands had been given the time to make their presence felt in public. For all practical purposes, these two women have ceased to be artists. They are merely mothers, wives and in other cases office workers or teachers as well. Thus I would suggest that the inability of most women in the prevailing socio-cultural milieu to reconcile between the responsibilities of being an artist and a mother/wife have effectively curtailed their growth as artists with a particular perspective.

On the other hand, I would suggest that the few women who have relatively succeeded as artists have done so mostly due to two reasons. First, they have had the ability to hire domestic aid to help them in some of their chores, and they managed to invest the resultant saving of time on painting and sculpting. Secondly, they have also had access to some independent wealth which meant that they did not have to go looking for employment as teachers, office workers and so on for the sake of survival. If they had to do that, they would also have moved away from being full time practitioners of art. Linked to these two issues is yet another reality which is the access these women had to an urban based network of influence which helped them in securing sponsorship, publicity, and ultimately a market as well. In this sense, the few successful women artists are also marked by a clear urban and middle/upper class background.

Conclusion: Can the Enduring Images of the Female Figure in Sri Lankan Art be Challenged or Transformed ?

At this point we need to pose the question whether the limited contribution of these women have impacted upon the art scene in a decisive manner. We would have to answer that question with a clear “no.” That is, in numbers or in artistic

or intellectual production and intervention, they do not constitute a force that has or could make a difference. This would continue to be the case if existing structural restrictions continue to be in place. As I stated in the beginning, as far as women artists' representation of the female figure is concerned, the great majority of those who are visible in the contemporary art scene have simply perpetuated the particular male-constructed representation I have referred to above. They have in no way challenged its epistemological origins or the image itself. That is in general, their contribution as well as the imagery of the female figure in their work are marked by a disturbing absence of agency.

But despite the general absence of agency in the work of women artists, and despite the absence of support networks and ideological sustenance, it seems to me that only three women artists have in recent times at least begun to challenge the sensuous and passive representation of the female figure. They are Druvinka Madawala,⁵ Anoli Perera, and Nilanthi Weerasekera.

In a recent review of Druvinka's paintings exhibited at the Heritage Art Gallery in Colombo (September 1997), Anoli Perera offers a specific reading in which she argues that Druvinka's feminine positionality plays an important role in her current work --but not in line with the established dominant patriarchal art tradition (Perera 1997b: 14):

“In all of the paintings one or more figures are always placed within a clearly demarcated and confined framework which reminds us of her fascination with the womb seen in her previous work. But unlike in those works, here, the womb has become the hibernating oasis for fully mature human silhouettes. The semiotics that come into play in her work assess the artist's feminine positionality in the construct of subjectivity in the phallo-symbolic order which is present in the works of Druvinka. The activation of her matrifocal consciousness places these victims of intense violence, which is signified by the ghostly figure in the “inset,” the womb, which is a dark, silent, and enclosed site of enigma. The purpose of this activity could be read as a ploy to avoid the grasp and the dual gaze, the gaze that is within the paintings and the gaze of the

⁵ The artist prefers to be called Druvinka, and would henceforth be referred to as such.

spectator which is symbolic of the patriarchal regime that is responsible for the chaos and destruction everywhere” (Perera 1997b: 14).

Thus according to this reading, Druvinka’s work uses a certain aspect of female sexual and biological identity, which in this case is the womb. In her work, she uses the womb as a site of symbolic protection from the chaos of the outside world, the chaos created by the patriarchal world order. Anoli Perera further argues:

“Within the phallic order, the spectacle being the female subject, the spectator personifies the patriarchal society and its power structures. The artist herself being a woman, her position becomes analogous to the marginalized and victimized. This positionality gives her adequate validity and emotional impetus to a certain degree, to identify with the refugees, who because of violence that was unleashed against them have become victimized, and therefore a spectacle. Hence, her desire to activate such a strategy of concealment from the scrutinizing gaze. Her use of the womb with its connotations of dark, dungeon-like attributes which is anti- panopticon (for which light is imperative), becomes the ideal hideout from the chaos and danger of outside. --- Using the woman’s body in this endeavor, the artist traverses the realms of maternity where she repeats the pre-oedipal nurturing of the child and using the maternal body as the sustainer of life and protector of the sibling” (Perera 1997b: 14).

Thus Anoli Perera argues in the context of Druvinka’s work, that aspects of female sexuality can be represented in art without framing them within an idiom of sensuousness, eroticism or passivity which are presently dominant themes in the way female figure is currently represented in Sri Lankan art.

In her own work Anoli Perera also has attempted to challenge this image and deconstruct it in a conscious manner. Even though her early work also betrays a preoccupation with painting women in a sensuous idiom, she has in recent times moved away from such representations. This departure was most visible in her most recent work titled "Vehicle Named Woman" exhibited at the Heritage Art Gallery in February 1998. This work constitute a series of steel sculptures, an installation using car tyres symbolic of the vagina among other things, and five separate art works using car parts such as doors and bonnets (which verge

between paintings, sculptures and installations) she has attempted to capture the harshness and the sense of bondage that mark the life of not simply women artists but women in general in Sri Lanka and elsewhere. Her works such as the “Womb in Confinement Series,” “Crucified Sex” and “Bound Chastity” capture those feelings. Here, there is nothing, sensuous, nothing erotic, and nothing beautiful or passive in this work. They are harsh, rugged, violent and even unpleasant. She has argued that she had consciously attempted to work on an aesthetic epistemology that draws from semiotics and concepts of gender, while trying to emphasize formal or decorative values secondarily, giving precedence to the ideas (Perera 1998). She describes some of the central significations of her work in the following words:

"The main installation deals with the patriarchal discourse of female sex and its contradictions. In so far as the female image is concerned, the veneration of motherhood, sacredness of chastity and sexual idealization of eroticized female body while labeling the woman a mysterious dark continent are the contradictory manifestations in this discourse. The series of metal sculptures which I have named the ‘wombs in confinement’ deals with the idea of the bound or bonded sexuality of the woman" (Perera 1998).

For Perera, there are clear correlations between the manner in which the car is utilized and perceived in society and the way in which the female image is viewed and constructed. Her decision to use car parts, in this exhibition was to capture this correlation:

"In the greater semiotic system the car is a masculine sign. It is a power machine, and the source of its power lies in its engine (rated by its “horse power”), powered by petroleum sources of energy and ignited by electricity. By owning such a machine vested with power, its owner becomes the controller of its mechanisms and manipulator of its power economies. It is a functional object, the acquisition and possession of which activates a certain signification. It is the signification of power which is identified with masculinity. Therefore it becomes a masculine sign.

In a second signifying system the car is also an object with a feminine gender status. It is a fetish object for the appropriation and control by the man and for their pleasure of manipulation. The car therefore becomes an object of pleasure, and thus a certain eroticism is attached to it. A certain fixation is developed by the owner towards the car: the car then becomes an object of fetishism. It is pampered, beautified, perfumed and sometimes venerated. Here the car as an object is appropriated and totally prostituted.

This appropriation and prostitution as an object of pleasure and the fetishism that is attached to it becomes analogous to the objectification of woman, and thus the car is christened with a feminine gender identity. This gender fixation is perpetuated by the technical devices, codes and conventions such as media , advertisements and social images etc. That is, the image of the car is linked with the image of the woman locating both within the same sphere of sexual objectification. Thus after the socio-political and consumerist rhetoric create the image of the car, it is perceived and consumed as an erotic and a fetish object. In this sense, the image of the car is promoted and consumed as an extension of feminine energy that is to be appropriated and manipulated and tamed if possible by the owner conventionally assumed as the man" (Perera 1998).

The other woman artist who has made a concerted attempt to initiate a rupture in the manner in which women are generally represented, not only in Sri Lankan art but also in Sri Lankan imagination is Nilanthi Weerasekara. Her first public attempt in achieving this was her recent solo exhibition of paintings (November 1997) called "Fabricated Woman." Her project and its politics were summarized in the following words in a statement she presented to those who visited the exhibition at the Heritage Art Gallery in Colombo:

"--- I am Nilanthi from Hettimulla, Kegalla. As a kid everybody called me Weerasekara's daughter. And at school I was known as Sepa's nangi (Sepa is my brother). And if by chance I had started an affair, 'a catch' I would have been referred to as 'so and so's girl,' 'catch' or 'bit.' --- And if an when, I marry I may be referred to as so and so's wife/woman and later, as so and so's mother. When would they call me Nilanthi Weerasekara" (Weerasekara 1997).

Like in the recent work of Anoli Perera dealing with issues of sexuality and female identity, Nilanthi Weerasekara's work is not formulated within a paradigm of sensuousness or passivity, eroticism or beauty. In fact here, those representations of the female have been consciously obliterated with layers of images appropriated from aspects of the material culture which in the perception of Weerasekara contributes to the process of constructing the woman in Sri Lankan. In her work there is no order but chaos. There is no sensuous, but almost a sense of urgency and violence. Moreover, her exhibition was a clearly formulated political intervention which she makes very clear in her own statement quoted above. But the opposition to the politics it represents was immediate and predictable. What was not predictable was that such opposition would manifest in the preview observations circulated at the exhibition itself. In his preview comments, Eric Ilayappaarchchi, the only serious and consistent commentator on art and related issues in the Sinhala language makes the following observations:

“--- We see in her paintings various female figures constituting of images of pieces of cloth, hems, stitches, strings, lines of buttons, advertising models etc. Nilanthi does not present such female subject matter as mere reportage, but in a way that initiates feelings of eroticism and sex appeal in those who view the paintings. Even though her paintings do not present nudes, love scenes or other sensuous visual representations, the woman's eroticism is presented very clearly on the canvas --- But feminist art critics who would not see any of these things would surely describe her work in the following fashion: You have arrived to destroy the fortress of male centric field of painting and its male hegemony. Because there are no female painters, the field of painting has become a vulgar male-centric field ---”⁶ (Ilayappaarchchi 1997).

Besides being naively male chauvinistic, perhaps without actually knowing it, and rabidly anti-feminist, Ilayappaarchchi also betrays a severe malnutrition in contemporary knowledge in visual art theory and models of evaluation as well as complete unfamiliarity with contemporary social and feminist theory. He sees eroticism and sensuousness in a situation where such attributes have been effectively wiped out as part of a particular artistic and political intervention. In his fear of both feminism and the kind of challenge women artists could possibly

⁶ Approximate translation.

pose, he has preferred to see something in an exhibition where what he wants to see is completely absent. I would suggest that these comments epitomize the kind of opposition progressive women artists will have to encounter if they dare transcend established conventions. Such opposition may in fact come from some of the established women artists themselves who also lack the kind of intellectual depth to challenge these notions. In fact, I would argue that Weerasekara's intervention is more important at rhetorical level, rather than at an intellectual level. For one, her presentation did not have the theoretical and reflective sophistication of Perera's exhibition referred to above. Moreover, she completely missed the politics of Ilayappaarachchi's comments and distributed the leaflet containing them on the opening day of her exhibition. That realization came much later. However, in a situation where such interventions are marked by their absence, her intervention nevertheless marks a significant development, particularly because it comes from an artist who is still attempting to carve out a niche for herself. I would also suggest that the fear of opposition such as those voiced by Ileyappaarachchi may be yet another factor that has prevented the emergence of a women's art movement in Sri Lanka.

In summary then it should be clear that due to the existing patriarchal structures, lack of support networks, the absence of a dynamic women's movement and the absence of ideological support, a vibrant women's art movement capable of challenging existing patriarchal values and the ways in which female subject is represented in Sri Lankan art is unlikely to emerge any time soon. What one will find is the irregular emergence of individual women artists who can initiate such challenges and debates on the basis of their individual political backgrounds, commitment, financial abilities and networks. That will surely have to take place in the midst of serious opposition. So for a long time we seem destined to live with the syrupy colors and passive "beauty" with which Masters of Sri Lankan art such as Senaka Senanayake and Mistresses of Sri Lankan art such as Iromi Wijewardena represent the female subject in a context where the female body is still mostly a site of exploitation, and an object to gaze at, and not a site of struggle for change.

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