SHWETA SHARDUL: A Multidisciplinary Journal
Volume XVII, Issue 1, Year 2020
ISSN 2631-2255
Peer-Reviewed
Open Access

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Visual Rhetoric in Contemporary Mithila Painting

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Abstract

This article examines how geometric and organic forms interplay to create visual rhetoric in Mithila painting.The regular form creates an altar where biological shape interplays to create cultural meaning of the visual text. On the one hand, Mithila folk art culminates using lines and on the other it exploits colour to express themselves. But to know the inherent meanings of the paintings we apply semiotic analysis as a tool to know exactly what the local folks mean by the particular symbol used in the visual text. Despite knowing multiple realities operates in the painting the above mentioned tool happens to reveal both logonomic and polysemous characteristic of Mithila art as an exemplar of the duality of the spiritual and the secular—a harmony brought about by the feminine principle underpinning the art. It is this very principle which still leavens the more recent commercial art-forms, which engage with contemporary cultural-political issues. Logonomic system reveals which ideology is into play while interpreting the visual texts; complex sort of ideology whereas the term 'polysemous' means the difficulty one has while separating threads from the tapestry of meaning.

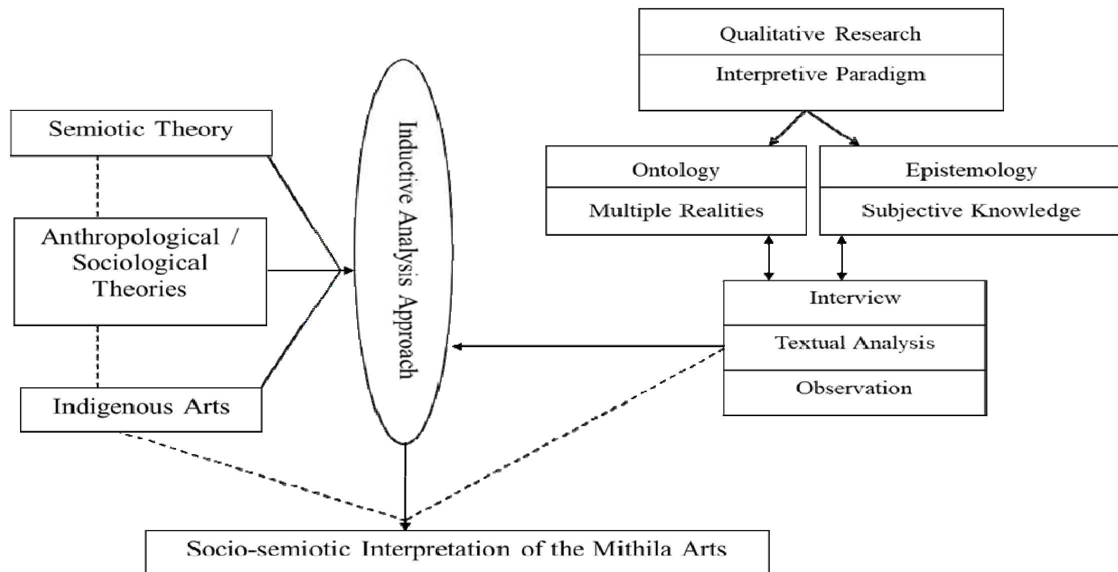
Keywords: Geometric, Organic, Semiotic, Logonomic and Polysemous

Introduction

Mithila painting, like many pieces of artwork, strikes a dexterous poise between a concrete shape and its abstract meaning. Visual rhetoric in Mithila painting begins from a dot and ends in a very complex configuration. And each point carries certain meaning in it. A shape is, however, not the only thing that remains fundamental to the meaning-making of a piece of painting. Other important visual elements are: colours and the range of values they embody, lines that help make up a shape, the space that dynamically-visually interacts with the lines, shapes and colours of a work of art to give them definition. Geometric shapes not only generate secular surroundings of the art work but also the spiritual ones of the local folks.

Methodology

This study will use Inductive Analysis Approach using Semiotic Theory, Anthropological sociological theories and Indigenous Arts theory for socio-semiotic Interpretation of the Maithili painting. The data for this qualitative research is collected through interview, textual analysis and observation. It further incorporates Ontology (multiple realities) and Epistemology (subjective knowledge) for Interpretive Paradigm. The following conceptual framework reveals the methodology clearly.



Discussion/Analysis

A line is a path traced by a moving point, for example, moving the point of a pencil along the surface of a sheet of paper. An artist falls back upon line drawing for coming up with an image that consists of distinct straight or curved lines placed against a usually plain background, without gradations in shade—darkness or hue—colour—to represent two-dimensional or three-dimensional objects. Line art emphasizes form and outline. For instance, in Mithila painting, artists from the Kayastha community makes use of kachni (lines) in which double lines are used to depict the outlines with the fine pattern created by means of hatching and stippling rather than a generous use of colours. Mani Sekhar Singh remarks in this connection: "The Kayastha artists utilize the potentiality of line as a pictorial element for shading required areas of image-sign and in the process convey some sense of volume . . . *kachani* . . ., which comes close to 'incising,' says a lot about the nature of the line utilized in shading as well as the

pictorial tool or implement" (436). Let us have a look at the following Mithila artwork (*Fig. 1*) of a dancing peacock in which lines rather than colours are symbolically expressive:

Fig. 1: Dancing Peacock; source: Madhubani Painting Collection. https://www.pinterest.com/pin/472103973414185692/

The artist captures the beauty of the dancing peacock more through the lines that depict the elegant plumage and less through the use of colours. In most of Mithila paintings, a double line is drawn as border and the gap is filled with small horizontal lines or sometimes with small dots.

After finishing the line work with a pencil, Mithila artists make the outline with a black marker pen. With the fine-tip pen, the inner outline is made. There is a double inner line throughout a piece of Mithila artwork as in the above figure of the dancing peacock. Dotted lines in interaction with the double lines help create the contours, which are the boundaries that mark three-dimensional forms. Circle-like lines trace the contours of the peacock's plumage so skillfully that they suggest fully rounded forms. Women of the Kayastha caste have earned their name for their elaborate style of Mithila paintings that use plenty of lines, outlines and contours.

Through a deft combination of lines, outlines and contours, a skilful artist comes up with an eye-catching shape. A shape, created when a line is enclosed, helps contribute to the balance within a work. A shape is a two-dimensional form of length and width. It occupies an area with identifiable boundaries. It is often contrasted with a mass, which is a three-dimensional form that occupies a volume of space. We speak of a mass of clay, the mass of a mountain, the masses of a work of architecture. Shapes and masses can be divided into two broad categories: geometric and organic. Geometric shapes and masses approximate the regular, named shapes and volumes of geometry such as square, triangle, circle, cube, pyramid, and sphere. Organic shapes and masses are irregular and evoke the living forms of nature. Let us have a look at the following artwork titled "A Brahmin" by Mahalaxmi Karn:

Fig. 2: MahalaxmiKarn'*s A Brahmin*; source: Mithila Painting.
http://peterzirnis.com/post/126443962447/mahalaxmi-and-shantanu-das

Here is a figure of a Brahmin with a personality—the well-fed and satisfied Pandit so commonly seen on the streets in Mithila. What help imitate the typical personality are the large almond shaped eye, the round chin, the mouth and nose, the soft curve of the arms and the hands holding a folded umbrella and a bottle-gourd amidst a background filled with shapes of branches and flowers.

A well-lined shape imparts a definite direction and movement to an artwork so that a spectator's eyes may "follow lines to see where they are going, like a train following a track. Artists can use this tendency to direct our eyes around an image and

to suggest movement" (Getlein 78). In the following painting titled "The Curses Begin" by Amrita Jha, the lines that a spectator's eyes follow most readily are vertical and horizontal lines related to his or her experience of gravity:

Fig. 3: Amrita Jha's "The Curses Begin"; source: Mithila Painting. http://peterzirnis.com/post/157257601742/the-vernacular-on-the-ground-in-madhubani

Jha's choice of the vertical gives the boy child's mother a height and authority denied to the mother holding the daughter. Similarly, the vertical rows of lotus flowers continue up to the heavens, while the horizontal lines of snakes create a visual field that surrounds and entraps this mother and her future daughter. What lends definiteness to the direction and movement in an artwork is the artist's choice of the colour. For

example, in the above painting by Amrita Jha, the sex of the child also reflects back onto the mother where the darker, contrasting colour of the figure cradling the boy gives that figure, a presence, a self-assurance that is lacking in the mother-daughter figure with its slightly anemic colour.

Colour as a semiotic mode contains multifold meanings. On the one hand, it seems natural whereas on the other hand, it looks personal. The conventional meaning of colour appears rampant where the art is performed as a social phenomenon but it becomes anarchic when the artists practice it to project their individual feelings. However, idiosyncratic use of colour adheres to its grammar; that basic pattern consciously extracted from the natural flow of colour in the surrounding. The deviation from the socially established colour norm obviously suggests that the artists have used colour for their own purpose. In this regard, viewers of the paintings base their understanding both on social convention and the natural surrounding—while making the particular piece of art.

Basically nature provides the sense of colour harmony to the artists and they form common consent to fix its meaning and the resultant meaning springs from the positive or negative attributes human beings seek out of it. That is, its meaning refers us to socially established and maintained convention and either to adherence or deviation from that. Adherence to it helps the artist use colour to communicate social message whereas deviation brings unpredictable meaning on the part of viewers. Nevertheless, artists follow certain grammatical rules like linguistic even in the dimension of colour

use. For example, they replace the golden colour of wheat into the blue one either to challenge the society by questioning it or to put forward their own point of view to shape the society. Otherwise, local artists use colour according to their own social values and norms. In this context, Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen assert:

> If the resource is sufficiently developed for sign-making we will call it a mode; similarly with the question of grammar, specific groups' interests in colour shape the signs of colour; and to understand what general principles of semiosis and of the specific semiosis of colour emerge from this that might provide a principled understanding of all uses of colour in all social-cultural domains. (345)

The form of activity, conduct, or process that involves signs, including the production of meaning depends on the common interest of people in the society and that mutual understanding reverberates in all the ritual practices. Moreover, any society provides the attributes to the sign on the basis of natural quality useful for the community. For example, Maithili society takes the colour red as a sign of progress or vitality because it finds the rays of Sun like that colour which is also the universal emblem of life on earth. Besides it, the colour of menstrual blood which revives life in the community makes this sign ever auspicious in the region.

Colour also plays crucial role in shaping the mood of people psychologically. Colour provides pleasure and affects a wide range of psychological and physiological responses. Restaurants decorated in red believed to increase appetite and therefore food

consumption. Blue surroundings will significantly lower a person's blood pressure, pulse, and respiration rate. There can be no doubt that colour works on the human brain and body in powerful ways. And colour is a function of light. In fact, all colours are dependent on light and no object possesses colour intrinsically. A red shirt does not have its own colour rather it is the reflected light rays. When light strikes the red shirt, for example, the shirt absorbs all the colour rays except the red ones, which are reflected, so our eyes perceive red. The rainbow consists of seven different colours which are refracted from the ray of sun light. They are divided into primary colours (red, yellow and blue); which cannot be made after mixing any two colours, secondary colours (orange, green and violet); which can be made mixing any two primary colours and tertiary colours (mixing a primary colour and an adjacent secondary colour). Moreover, a colour has three properties. They are called hue, value and intensity. Hue is the name of the colour according to the categories of the colour wheel—green or red or violet-blue.

Value refers to relative lightness or darkness. Most colours are recognizable in a full range of values; for instance, we identify as "red" everything from palest pink to darkest maroon. In addition, all hues have what is known as a normal value—the value at which we expect to find that hue. We think of yellow as a "light" colour and violet as a "dark" colour, for example, even though each has a full range of values. A colour lighter than the hue's normal value is known as a tint; for example, pink is a tint of red. A colour darker than the hue's normal value is called a shade; maroon is a shade of red.

Likewise, intensity is also called chroma or saturation—refers to the relative purity of a colour. Colours may be pure and saturated or they may be grayed and softened to some degree. The purest colours are said to have high intensity; grayer colours, lower intensity. To lower the intensity of a colour when mixing paints or dyes, the artist may add a combination of black and white (gray) or may add a little of the colour's complement. Likewise, colours behave differently depending on whether an artist is working with light or pigment. For instance, red and green light mix to produce yellow light, and blue light to the mix and the result is white. Similarly, pigments, like any other object in the world, have to our eyes the colour that they reflect. A red pigment, for example, absorbs all the colours in the spectrum except red. When pigments of different hues are mixed, the resulting colour is darker and duller; because together they absorb still more colours from the spectrum. Mixing pigments is thus known as a subtractive process.

Whether subtracting or adding, colour affects us on such a basic level that we have a direct emotional response to it. Blue is often associated with freedom because it is also the colour of the sky and the ocean. It is a cool colour and has been shown to have a calming effect. In Hinduism, blue is the colour of the god Vishnu, the god of order and stability, but it is also associated with the dark and disturbing power of the goddess Kali (Figure 4) in the following piece of painting:

Fig. 4: Devendra Jha's Goddess Kali; source: Novica in association with National Geographic. https://www.novica.com/p/madhubani-painting-angry-goddess-kali/105519/

Through poise between blue and black colours, the artwork presents violently subversive power of both Kali (black) and Tara (blue). Kali and Tara are similar in appearance. They both are described as standing upon a supine Shiva in an inert or corpse-like form.

As an example of a superb balance of colour and line, let us have a look at the following artwork "Fisherman and Boy" by two Mithila artists, Mahalaxmi Karn and Shantanu Das:

Fig. 5: Mahalaxmi Karn and Shantanu Das's "Fisherman and Boy"; source: Mithila Painting. http://peterzirnis.com/post/126443962447/mahalaxmi-and-shantanu-das

The two fishermen in the center and the group of fish below complete the painting, which shows how well the colour complements the line. The darker colours of the net and the grouped yellow fish set against the black depths of the water, the reddish brown checkerboard pattern of the boat, and the vibrant red dhotis of the fisherman all vie for our attention and all afford visual pleasure. Though the colours attract us first, the line work is marvelous and contributes as much to the success of the painting as does the colour choice as well as direction and movement. The flow and movement of the background water between the bottom of the net and the head of the boy sitting in the boat is quite noticeable. We clearly see the crest and the trough of the waves, while elsewhere the water appears as a smoothly rolling wave or as a current temporarily stopped in its flow by the movement of other waves. The tiny threads that come off the

edges of the open net add a nearly imperceptible decorative element to that already attractive design, or the light reddish stippling on the fishermen, barely noticeable, yet the colour complements their dhotis and softens their forms against the pale green background that fills in the space.

The space in and around a work of art is not a void, but a dynamic visual element that interacts with the lines and shapes and colours and textures of a work of art to give them definition. An art form with mass exists in three-dimensional space—that is, the actual space in which our bodies also stand. Aesthetic works of art take their character from the ways in which they carve out volumes of space within and around them. In the above painting—"Fisherman and Boy"—all the major icons occupy the central space of the painting. All are approximately the same size, and almost equidistantly spaced from the edges of the painting. The fisherman stands tall in the boat, feet spread, hands holding the rope as he casts the circular net which opens wide in the sky over the huddled fish at the bottom of the water. The water—a Mithila style patchwork of nearly invisible, finely drawn lines—fills in the void, thereby giving a uniform background that lifts the figures off the paper into their own space and time. The artists have chosen the moment when the net is tossed. They have pared that moment down to three elements and spaced the whole in a minimalist fashion, producing an extraordinarily maximum effect of what it means to be a fisherman. The lightness of colour of the water surface, which occupies a much greater space than the darker colour of the fisherman's dhotis and the fishing net, creates the visual tone of a

rather frozen action, which appears to be separate from this transitory world, producing a timeless Mithila hieroglyph of fishermen at work.

The visual element of tone defines the lightness or darkness of a colour and has a bearing on its expressive character. Tone can be used to create a contrast of light and dark, the illusion of form, a dramatic or tranquil atmosphere, a sense of depth and distance, and a rhythm or pattern within a composition. As another example, let us have a look at the following painting, by Mahalaxmi Karn, of Hanuman flying back from the Himalayas carrying the Dronagiri Mountain that has the Sanjivani herb to revive the dying Lakshman:

*Fig. 6: Mahalaxmi Karn's Ha*numan; source: Mithila Painting. http://peterzirnis.com/post/126443962447/mahalaxmi-and-shantanu-das

In what is all line—a wonder of hatching and stippling—colour is kept to a minimum, just enough to identify the actors in the drama. Yet the colour contrast sets a tone of life and death. While the red colour denotes life and blood, the black counterpart is associated with death and power. The landscape has four clearly delineated areas: a

triangle at the centre with its repetitive iconic blades of grass coloured in black and laid out as a carpet for the dying Lakshman and grieving Rama. A tree on each side rises to the top of the painting. One with graceful boughs bends under the weight of large red fruit while the other stands tall with dense, small leaves repeated in such patterns that the whole tree appears to quiver with life, responding to every slight breeze. Hanuman himself, magnificent in contrasted red and black dress, appears high in the sky. Balancing the Dronagiri mountain with its life giving herbs on his right hand while his left holds his black, iron tipped mace, he arrives in time to revive Lakshman and save the war against the demon king Ravana.

To streamline the main point here, Mahalaxmi's "Hanuman" painting strikes a clever balance between what we see in abstract terms and what we eventually realize is represented. But colours and shapes are not the only things that our eyes take in as we try to make sense of the painting. We get to know the tone of life and death through the colour contrast. We notice that line work predominates in this painting with an almost intoxicating effect: the dashes creating the never completed circles of swirling air, the tree leaves moving in all directions, the lines of the shawl flowing gracefully, their red colour contrasting with the black swirls of the air. Similarly, other visual elements, including shape, mass and space are the ingredients available for an artist have semiotic significance in the process of making an artwork.

The analytical framework re-orients mainstream semiotic analyses of sign systems towards inclusion in discourse and social change in what is called the method of social

semiotics. Social semiotics embraces meaning-making as a social practice, that is to say, it studies signifying practices in specific socio-cultural circumstances. In other words, Jay Lemke defines socio-semiotics as:

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

As every community is unique, the signs used by one community are likely to be unlike those used by another, for instance, in much of Asia, including South Asia, red is the traditional colour for a wedding dress (symbolizing joy and reproduction) whereas it is a mourning dress for people in Ivory Coast. Signs have diverse meanings in diverse social and cultural contexts. Thus, socio-semiotics is socio-centered, going from context to text, not from text to context.

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

> Ideology viewed as false consciousness represents the world 'upside down' and in inverted form. But it also displays an image of the world as it ought to be, as seen from the vantage point of the dominant, or as it is from the vantage point of the dominated group. To capture the contradiction characteristic of ideological forms, we will talk of ideological complexes, a functionally related set of contradictory versions of the world, coercively imposed by one social group on another on behalf of its own distinctive interests or subversively offered by another social group in attempts at resistance in its own interests. An ideological complex exists to sustain relationships of both power and solidarity, and it represents the social order as simultaneously serving the interests of both dominant and subordinate. (3)

Social semiotics supports a dialectically mediated approach that calls for a multidimensional and complex understanding of the interplay between agency and structure, between lived human experience and the social power relations to which literary works or artworks are linked. It aims at elaborating a new mode of analysis that places more emphasis on the roles of socio-cultural contexts and the accosting power conflict and resistance which not only define the identity of the community but which ultimately point toward a transformation of the society.

Processes of struggle and resistance, which shape the transformation of a society, have a bearing on every level of semiotic systems, at the smallest level of which "power is put to the test in very exchange, and the logonomic system is typically a

record of this" (Hodge and Kress 8). The logonomic system—a set of rules prescribing the conditions for production and reception of meanings—is integral part of an ideological complex as it specifies 'who' claims to initiate or know meanings about 'what' topic 'under what circumstances' and 'with what modalities'. Logonomic systems as ideological complexes "reflect contradictions and conflicts in the social formations" (5). When a logonomic system tolerates, for instance, a statement insulting to women to be read as a joke, it refers to a male-dominated structure of the society.

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

Fig. 7: Rani Jha's Female Infanticide; source: Mithila Painting. http://peterzirnis.com/post/58303202722/rani-jha-feminist-perspectives-in-mithila-art

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

The socio-semiotic approach to the analysis of Mithila painting gains in legitimacy from the central argument of a book like *Reading Images: The Grammar of*

Visual Design by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen. The book makes the point that the visual is an organized and structured message, connected to the verbal text but not dependent on it. This contention marks a departure from Roland Barthes's argument in "Rhetoric of the Image" that the meanings of images are too polysemous to be deciphered separately from the verbal text. The duo—Kress and Leeuwen—repeatedly stress the social and ideological components of sign making, interpretation, and valuation. Decoding visuals requires attention to the reading pattern and other cultural aspects of a particular country: "The place of visual communication in a given society can only be understood in the context of, on the one hand, the range of forms or modes of public communication available in that society and, on the other hand, their uses and valuations" (35). The authors take this kind of understanding visual images as figuring out what they call the "semiotic landscape"—"the features of a landscape (a field, a wood, a clump of trees, a house, a group of buildings) only make sense in the context of their whole environment and of the history of its development" (35).

Conclusion

Semiotic forms and styles are fashioned as much by the essential uniqueness and distinctiveness of the medium as by the tangibles and intangibles of a culture: its histories, its values, and its worldviews. For example, the square in Maithili culture represents a sacred enclosure-like piece of land (*devchauk*) on which rituals are performed. While the *devchauk* resembles Nature or Mother Goddess, the ritual-place represents the performance-site for all the rites associated with Mother Goddess. As

such, the square is considered divine for its perfection and as symbolic of knowledge and human thought, while circle is looked upon as earthly, human and observed in everyday life—moon, sun, horizon, water drop, rainbow, etc. Triangles, which resemble mountains or trees, are associated with an ancient worship of the female divinity. This association of the feminine principle with triangles is deeply embodied in the Maithili consciousness so that the Devi's worship is performed through her *yantra*—a triangle through She is invoked. Although the Goddess has no image once conjured, she may be seen in that likeness. The *tantric* elaborations of the forms of the goddess are explicit: her supremacy in the *tantras* rest on her felt presence in trees, in plants and animals who contribute to her shape or that of her incarnations as clan or community deities.

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