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INDIAN WOMAN BETWEEN 'NEW' TRADITION AND 'OLD' PATRIARCHY. Bengali painting in the service of nationalism

The second half of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century was an extremely important period for shaping the new ideal of Indian womanhood. An ideology of national liberation began to form around woman. Such actions were undertaken mainly in response to two factors. The first was British publications about the fall and regression of Indian civilisation. The second was the discovered splendor of an Aryan past, which the European Orientalists had written about. Initially, the Indians were very enthusiastic about these discoveries, believing that a common origin would provide the opportunity for a harmonious coexistence between themselves and the British. These researchers reflected the views of a small group of people educated according to the Western model who wanted to modernise India through the development of education, science and the spread of Christianity. With time, the potential of the Aryan theory was also perceived by Hindu social reformers, as well as by nationalists, including the founder of Arya Samaj—Dayananda Sarasvati (1824-1883). Drawing mainly on the methods developed by the first Orientalists in search of the lost magnificence of their country, Indian researchers turned to Sanskrit and especially Vedic texts, regarding them as genuine and uncontaminated by later tradition. The source of civilisation and religion was seen in the Vedas and Upanishads. There, too, models were sought for a perfect vision of womanhood. The overall concept of an ideal woman was presented in 1842 by Peary Chand Mitra (1814-1883). By examining various sources, including the Vedas, tantric texts, Kalidasa dramas or Tamil works, he crystallised the national identity of Indian women,

built on ‚high' culture, unlike the contemporary one, contaminated with later influences, especially Muslim[1].

A similar opinion was mooted by Dayananda Sarasvati, one of the most influential interpreters of Aryan culture. He believed that in the past men and women had equal status, or that women's was sometimes even higher, and there was no polygamy or child marriages. Furthermore, they enjoyed greater respect than their contemporaries in Christian Europe[2].

The intense process of colonisation, which India underwent in the second half of the nineteenth century, made Indians take two main positions regarding women. The supporters of one saw the reasons for the fall of the nation reflected in their poor situation, which they aimed to reform. The proponents of the second interpreted their status quite differently—as the strength of the nation. They believed that reforms may pose a threat to women and, consequently, to the entire nation.

In India, there were two main concepts for the functioning of a new type of homestead. The first was based on the assumption that a woman must be the partner of an educated husband, so she should be able to read and write, and sometimes leave the home. The second was an acute reaction to British influence and consisted in the complete subjugation of women. Both, however, viewed women as the beating heart of the nation, its sanctum, the moral pillar of the whole society. Their bodies were seen as a temple of virtue, stability, the last bastion of freedom.

The second of the above-mentioned concepts of homestead construction at this time can be described in terms of the Brahmin patriarchate. In this system women ought to be kept in a state of 'purity', meaning without foreign influences, and orientated towards religion. An important issue was to cut them off from the public sphere and secular education, yet the only desirable form was in the field of religion and Indian tradition, considered to be much more valuable than the knowledge possessed by the educated.[3] Religious education was conducted by oral transmission, while the principles of tradition were conveyed at home. 'For a woman, the household is the Gita' caimed the nationalists.[4] Western education was thought to be a polluting

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1) Chakravarti (1989: 38).

2) Rai (1915: 143–149).

3) Coomaraswamy (1918: 84).

4) Sarkar (1987: 2013).

influence, and women as 'the guardians of spiritual culture'[5] should live in moral purity. It was the shastras, not modern legislation, that were supposed to shape their behaviour and to normalise their whole lives. Such an attitude meant that many forms of oppression were sanctioned, attributing them to tradition. For example, all medical arguments against child marriages were rejected, considering that they were already regulated by the shastras, although sometimes even criticised if they did not correspond to the concepts of the nationalists.

The reformers, adopting earlier views, claimed that the girl must have intercourse with her husband directly after her first menstruation because if she did not, her womb would be unclean and, consequently, her offspring too, and as such she would not be able to make sacrifices to her ancestors.[6] They believed that sexual maturity was attained at about 10-12 years of age. Thus, Indian women had to exist in total submission, focused solely on their husband and religion. Religion was their life, and domestic life was their religion. They lived in contemporary times yet mentally they languished in the past. Their homes—their kingdoms—became bastions of tradition. One of the nineteenth-century authors put it this way: the so-called subordination and low position of our women creates sacred jewels of virtue that shine in the world despite centuries of political subordination.[7] The greatest emphasis was placed on purity. The strict moral code, previously binding primarily on the brahmin woman, began to be imposed on all women.

The ideal Hindu woman would now be like an ideal woman of the highest caste. Those who had previously more freedom gradually lost it. They were brought into the coherent, oppressive system of the Brahmin patriarchate.

At the beginning of the 20th century, rapid and significant changes took place in Indian art, influenced by the powerful independence movement, whose beginnings can be clearly observed in the second half of the previous century. Importantly, this was directly related to the entire colonial machine and was in some sense initiated by the British themselves. Ideas of independence were conceived among the elites, the vast majority of whom had been educated by the British system. In the area of art, the first steps in the direction of native art from the past were also initiated by the British—Ernest Binfield Havell (1861-1934), Sister Nivedita (1867-1911) and half-Sri

5) Coomaraswamy (1918: 84).

6) Sarkar (2000: 224).

7) Sarkar (2000: 41).

Lankan half-Briton—Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (1877-1947). The three of them in some way created the foundations of the swadeshi ideology in art—a movement supporting what is native, or national art. They quickly found supporters for their ideas among the Indians, including the exquisite artist and thinker Abanidranath Tagore, and the Japanese—Okakura Kakuzo (1862-1913), who—which is worth noting—in his actions towards national art was also inspired by the European, Orientalist Ernest Francisco Fenollos (1853-1908). Their ideas were also propagated by religious authorities, including one of the most outstanding at that time—Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902).

The basis for these thinkers was the recognition of the fundamental difference between East and West—the former being spiritual and the latter materialistic. The character of both cultures was reflected in art; the Eastern was considered symbolic and spiritual, while the Western was considered realistic and material. The ideology of new oriental art was based on the fundamental declaration of the separateness of Eastern art. According to thinkers and artists, it was supposed to refer to old forms, unchanged by European influences. The latter, as incompatible with the Asian spirit, degraded local creativity.

An important role in the creative output of Bengal artists was played by a woman figure. The first tendencies towards the formation of a new ideal of womanhood were already observable at the end of the 19th century, both in art and in literature. There are critical opinions about the type propagated by Raja Ravi Varma and artists related to him. In an essay published in 1899, Balendranath Tagore (1870-1899) describes Shakuntala painted in this style as a ,well-nourished resident of the harem', and according to him, she should be the opposite of this type—she was supposed to be a slim, ethereal woman.[8)]

The same was true of Abanindranath Tagore, who at the beginning of his career searched for inspiration in various sources. He was supposed to have received a book from a British lady about traditional Irish music with illustrations which—as he himself described—were examples of old European art. He also received from a relative a miniature representing, in his opinion, traditional Indian art.[9)]

8) Mitter (1994: 279).

9) Parimoo (1973: 74–75).

A breakthrough in this matter was the meeting of Abanindranath Tagore with Havell, who opened the world of Mughal miniatures before the eyes of the artist. He referred to the British man as his guru and together they delved into the study of ancient Indian painting. The fruit of these activities was the work of 'Abhisar',[10] which stylistically refers to pahari miniatures of the Kangra type—an ethereal female figure enveloped in thin fabric.

A Bengali-style woman was the embodiment of the ideal proclaimed among intellectuals centred around the ideology of the swadeshi. As such, she had to have a spiritual, ethereal, almost real, exterior. She could not expose corporeality as a non-imposing exalted idea. Thus, she was wrapped in fabrics that created arabesque layers, completely dematerialising and transporting her to the land of spirits.

The ethereal female figure was depicted in mythological, historical scenes, inspired by literature or while performing appropriate rituals.

Among the mythological figures chosen were mainly those that reflected the lofty ideals of womanhood. One of them was Sita—the perfect wife of Rama, who treated her husband like a god, accompanied him everywhere and obeyed his orders, even when he banished her from their home. An important moment in her life was the test of fire. She did not hesitate to enter the flames to prove her purity. Sarada Ukil depicted this moving moment in his painting—a woman (Sita) with arms folded rises in the midst of orange flames (Kumar Gallery, New Delhi). Sister Nivedita called Sita the Indian Madonna,[11] and Romesh Chunder Dutt thought that for millions of Indian women her story, suffering and faithfulness were 'a moral lesson given from the cradle and remembered until death. World literature has not created a more exalted ideal of feminine love and sacrifice'.[12] For nationalists, Sita and Rama were the ideal spouses—the purpose of marriage should be to imitate them and not to seek selfish pleasures.[13]

The ideal for Indian women, often mentioned by nationalists as a model to imitate, was also Savitri.[14] This wife, full of love and determination, even negotiated with Yama the god of death to bring her husband—Satyavan—back to life life. She became a source of inspiration for many works in the style of

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10) Havell (1902), Parimoo (1973: ill 22).

11) Nivedita (1955c: 62).

12) Dutt (1900: 20).

13) Coomaraswamy (1918: 87).

14) Coomaraswamy (1918: 94); Nivedita (1955b: 179).

the Bengali school. An unusual aura is exuded by the work of Abanindranath Tagore (1897–1900, L. T. P Manjusri Collection),[15] who chose a key moment in the story—Savitri is in discussion with Yama, while the body of her husband lies at her feet. An important role in this representation is played by the fire flickering from the embers above the figures—this is the source of light, and also highlights the drama of the work. This subject matter was also broached by Nandalal Bose (1913).[16] In his work, Savitri is less real than Yama—the god is featured as a more earthly figure than the fleeting figure of the ethereal woman. The artist applied the same procedure, which is visible in the Sati painting—emphasis of spiritual qualities result in the almost complete loss of her corporeality, as if she were only partially human and more of a celestial being.

This motif also appears in the love poems of nayak-nayika bheda, previously popular in Rajput painting. Dreamy nayikas running to their trysts or longingly awaiting their beloved spoke to the sensitivity of the Bengali artists. As mentioned, even the first work of Abanindranath Tagor executed in the new style was dedicated to this subject. The painting shows an ethereal woman on her way to a secret meeting with a man (abhisarika nayika). Nandalal Bose presented the theme of a heroine anxiously waiting (utka nayika) for her beloved in the thickets (1939, National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi).[17] It is slightly modified in relation to the original Rajput version. Traditionally, the woman was depicted in the center of the composition. In Bose's painting, the nayika (in this case Radha) is barely visible among the trees and bushes. The artist emphasised the erotic tension of waiting by using red for the heroine's body. This colour is associated with sexuality, fertility, desire and auspiciousness. Thus, the small figure draws the attention of the viewer and forms the central element of the composition more symbolically than in traditional art. Bose paid a lot of attention to the colours in his paintings. He repeatedly published texts devoted to art including such issues.[18] The artist believed that colours should be seen not as imitations, but as equivalents and ‚the artist learns from the nature of subtle colour relationships, their music [...]. All this can be admired in the old Rajput, Mogul and Persian

[15] Forge, Lynch (2009: 15).

[16] Mackenzie (1913: 52–53).

[17] Quintanilla (2008: 134).

[18] They were collected and published by his student Kalpati Ganapati Subramany (Bose 1999).

miniatures'.[19] In his reflections on colours, he often referred to the meanings that were attributed to them in the shilpa shastras, and so red was traditionally combined with the aesthetic taste of dread and Shiva.[20] In the work in question, the artist used it in the meaning in which it appears in the Rajput miniature painting. However, it was not a mechanical imitation, because women were not presented with red skin,[21] but with a creative exploitation of the symbolism of red.

Nandalal Bose, inspired by miniatures and the theme of the nayak-nayika bheda, also created wiraha nayika—impassioned by love and longing for her beloved, fanned by her companions (1936, National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi).[22] Stylistically, the artist referred to the Bundi, Basholi and Chaurapanchashika styles. To emphasise the erotic sense of the work, he showed the woman in such a way that the viewer might have the impression that he or she is above her. The decorative bed on which she rests looks like a frame surrounding her. This type of presentation recalls the above-mentioned images of women at their toilet—like deities, they were an object of adoration, yet with a strong erotic charge.

The choice of such topics, as mentioned, was dictated by the desire to revitalise art by referring to old patterns. In the case of the nayak-nayika bheda theme, it also marked a return to a traditional vision of womanhood—in this case, the speculative patterns of women's amorous behaviour. The authors of this poetry—men—created extensive classifications of both their beauty and their relationships with partners. These pieces are a reflection of male fantasies and their eagerness to subjugate women. The differences between the descriptions of male and female figures are striking. Men are the recipients of pleasure and all the activities of their partners are focused around them. One might even say that it is a world filled with various women who exist only and exclusively for men. They are the active ones—they organise trysts, suffer dilemmas or prepare bedding in the bushes. The man is seemingly passive, but thanks to his power to control the feelings of the woman and her behaviour, he is her master and authority. The woman is subject to his total control. Bengali artists eagerly reached for these Rajput-based models, both

[19] Bose (1999: 45).

[20] Shukla (1957: 74).

[21] Naval (2004:193–197).

[22] Quintanilla (2008:132).

in literature and painting, creating a world of romantic women who were subjected to the will of their men.

In addition to the patterns of behaviour drawn from mythology, literature and history, earthly women and their ceremonies were also presented, showing the magnificence and devotion of Hindu women. The images of devadasi are interesting in this respect. The tradition of maintaining temple dancers was a subject of massive criticism at the time. In this context, the choice of such a subject may arouse astonishment. The artist showed these women in a spiritual aura, thus depriving them almost entirely of their corporeality. This treatment was intended to divert attention from their physicality and help focus on spiritual values. In a letter to Coomaraswamy, Tagore wrote that he wanted to execute this work 'in the most calm state of mind'. He also mentions that the devadasi could leave the temple and sometimes came to his home, singing religious poems, such as the Gita Govinda, but they never wanted to dance.[23] Believers surrounded them with great reverence and they were sometimes called the 'representatives of Lakshmi, walking goddesses', and temple brahmins stressed that the sight of the devadasi can be compared to seeing Jagannatha.[24] Thanks to their sacred status as the god's wives, they were auspicious in two ways—always married and associated with God. They were often invited to homes and recited religious songs, as Tagore mentioned, as well as performing cleansing rituals to prevent the 'evil eye'.[25] His image of the devadasi was opposite to how they were depicted in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Then these dancers were often photographed, often posing as the harem beauties known from European paintings. Such a method of presentation sexualised them even further and transferred them to a land of oriental European imaginations. Europeans often saw in the devadasi institution the personification of a civilisational fall and regression. An extreme example of their objectification and their transformation into a symbol of a sexually unrestrained India was the government's decision in Madras in 1923 to send a group of dancers, then widely regarded as prostitutes, to an imperial exhibition in London. This aroused great indignation among Indians, who believed that such activities were aimed at humiliating them and their entire culture. Reformers and thinkers, convinced of the greatness and grandeur of old India, believed that in the 'golden age' the devadasi were virgins,

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[23] Mitter (1994: 322).

[24] Panjrath, Ralhan (2000: 198).

[25] Singha, Massey (1976: 59–60).

comparable to Vestal virgins and Christian nuns. Only with the passage of time, under the influence of the same factors that led to the fall of civilisation, did their degradation ensue. Some saw the Muslims as the main culprits, while others indicated the destructive role of the Dravidians as indigenous people with degenerate practices as opposed to the 'pure' Aryans. According to the Indians then, it was assumed to have been a wonderful and pure tradition, which degenerated only later.[26] Tagore, by removing the devadasi from their corporality and drawing attention to their spiritual values, restored their dignity and the original sense of their function—the earthly spouses of a god. He also ennobled Hinduism, which, according to many nationalists, was mistakenly perceived by Europeans as a habitat of regression and sexual deviations.

The spirituality of Indian women was often contrasted with the materialism and corruption of European women. Thus, Indian women were presented many times during religious ceremonies. As the husband was like a god for the model Hindu woman, she was shown in festive situations—for example, wending her way to the banks of the Ganges with lamps (Abanindranath Tagore, 1921, private collection). As previously mentioned, women usually performed such rituals for the well-being of their husbands, as in the case of worshiping Shiva during the Shivaratri festival (for example painting by K. Venkatappa, Sri Jayachamarajendra Gallery, Mysore).[27] Married women then prayed for the good fortune of their husbands, while single women would offer supplication for a husband as wonderful as Shiva. They might also perform ceremonies related to their home life, for the good of all its inhabitants, such as during the festival of lights. This subject was also broached by artists emulating the style of Raja Ravi Varma yet found a completely different expression in the work of Abanindranath Tagore (private collection). There is nothing here of the literalness of the ritual depicted, for example, by Mahadev Vishvanath Dhuradhar. On the contrary: the painting shows only an ethereal woman with a lamp in her hand. The artist focuses on her aura of spirituality and the religious meaning of the ritual. A woman, like in Dhurandhar's work, is also Lakshmi, but almost disembodied—the true heart and spirit of the home.

One ritual particularly associated with women was sati. They were portrayed in an idealised and spiritual way, such as in the paintings of Nandalala

[26] Vijaisri (2004: 192–205).

[27] Mitter (1994: ill. XXV).

Bose where a woman with arms folded is depicted against an abstract background as she approaches the glow of a fire (first version 1907, and many more followed). The choice of this topic was dictated not only by the desire to refer to their own tradition, but by other factors too. Because this was a custom with which the British had been fighting almost from the very beginning of their administration in India and against which they had introduced appropriate legal regulations, some Hindus saw it as an assault on their own culture and a breaking of the promise that the British would not interfere in religious matters. According to the nationalists, the struggle against sati was an attack on the traditional vision of womanhood in India. The ideal woman should always be faithful to her husband and, as such, also accompany him on the funeral pyre. This was emphasised as the moral superiority of Indian women over British women. Lofty images of self-immolation referred to this ideal. Cultivating the sati tradition became a matter of national concern at the end of the 19th century. Some even thought that it was the last hope for the conquered Indian nation.[28)]

Sister Nivedita was delighted with this painting. She wrote that the woman is radiant with her own triumph and embodies the Indian concept of a woman's splendor.[29)] A similar view was held by Ananda Coomaraswamy, who stated that the representation is filled with the passion of self-sacrifice for love.[30)] He even stated that this was the most wonderful painting to have been created among the circle of Tagore's students.[31)] The sati rite was, according to him, the last proof of oneness in love—a devotion of both body and soul that transcends the grave.[32)] The fight against the abolition of sati was also a struggle against the liberation of women. Breaking them free from oppressive structures threatened to collapse the whole idealised vision of Indian society and the loss of the last realm over which men held sway. Many activists opposed it vehemently, including Coomaraswamy. He wrote that even the most progressive nationalists supported this custom and instead of the shame that the Europeans wished to impose they should feel proud of their women.[33)] He even referred to examples from the West, such as the

28) Sarkar (2001: 42).

29) Nivedita (1955a: 67–68).

30) Coomaraswamy (1911: 82).

31) Coomaraswamy (1912: 133).

32) Coomaraswamy (1918: 91).

33) Coomaraswamy (1918: 91).

Titanic catastrophe, when women were said to have refused to be rescued without their husbands. He wanted to prove that love until death, and even beyond, was not a sign of regression and occurred everywhere.[34] According to him, this was an ideal of conduct and women behaved in such a way when they could be themselves. He then reached the conclusion that the Oriental woman is not oriental—she is just a woman.[35] Coomaraswamy believed that the swadeshi movement was characteristic in its struggle against foreign ideas, such as the liberation of women.[36]

This does not mean that only men presented sati and encouraged it. Some Indian women also engaged in the fight against the ban, believing that it was their privilege. In the oppressive world of men, they could find their own space where they would be admired and elevated. The attitude glorifying sati is visible in a painting by the artist Shukhalata Rao, who depicted an ethereal and spiritual woman performing the ritual (1886–1969, Indian Museum, Kolkata). Once again, a woman was to bear the honour of her entire family and nation on her shoulders, which would sometimes lead her to self-destruction.

Even if a woman were to decide not to burn alongside her husband, she could still personify a perfect Indian womanhood. An idealistic image of a widow appeared in the works of Bengali school artists as a novelty in Indian painting (besides religious representations, mainly of the goddess Dhumavati, or commissioned works for the British Company Painting). Mukul Dey (1895-1989) is the author of an interesting work on this subject (1922, Victoria and Albert Museum, London). Three women are depicted in the painting—two widows (older and younger) and one married woman who perform rituals over a water basin in great concentration. They all represent the ideals proclaimed by nationalists. In their opinion, both a married woman devoutly cultivating traditional values and focused on her husband, as well as a widow in her renunciation of worldly pleasures and concentration on religion, were bastions of tradition, impossible for the colonisers to quell. This work reflects these very ideas—regardless of marital status or age, pious women constitute the pure heart of India. One might go so far as to say that the national movement somehow ennobled the status of widows. Some of the thinkers associated with it were simply delighted by widowed Indian women

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[34] Coomaraswamy (1918: 94–95).

[35] Coomaraswamy (1918: 97).

[36] Coomaraswamy (1912).

who showed such a pious attitude. Sister Nivedita repeatedly expressed her admiration for the spirituality and religiosity of Indian women. Quoting one of them, she wrote that the life of an Indian woman is devoted to the worship of her husband and, after his death, God. Furthermore, the latter is of much greater value.[37] Thus, the previously downtrodden Indian widows gained dignity and, moreover, were allocated an important role in creating Indian spirituality, and thus in the struggle for independence. On the other hand, enclosing them in this vision barred the way for them to leave lives spent in oppressive self-distress and introduce reforms that would genuinely improve their lives.

The image of womanhood created by the artists of the Bengali school corresponded to the ideological assumptions of those independence movements that saw women as a bastion of Hinduism. It appealed to the spiritual values that the woman were supposed to personify, at the same time removing them from the corporeality associated with impurity and often a source of suffering. The woman, confined to the narrow home environment and reduced to the role of a slave carrying the burden of the nation on her shoulders, was transferred to the land of the spirit. The idealisation of womanhood in the political conditions of the early twentieth century was a factor that slowed social reforms and perpetuated oppression. Of special significance in this context were paintings depicting widows and the sati ritual. In a sense, they constituted a reaction to movements aimed at improving the fate of women. Therefore, they were one cog in the wheel that worked to oppress women. The use of constructs created in relation to women and their lives in anti-colonial rhetoric led to a situation where any attempt to oppose them were even considered to be collaboration with the coloniser. This meant, as Monika Bobako accurately described, that from silent victims, women became silent hostages of the anti-colonial struggle.[38] The analysed works, despite the apparent aura of spirituality and ethereality, hide a very dark face. They show, in an idealised way, the cruel forms of oppression that posed a genuine source of anguish for women. In an ornate form, they presented something that was cruel in essence. By beautifying terrible oppression they neutralised, sanctioned and perpetuated it. Thus, such depictions were one of the factors delaying real social changes and the liberation of women. Paintings with women made by artists associated with the Bengal School

[37] Nivedita (1906: 73).

[38] Bobako (2011: 103).

can be seen as a form of ‚invented tradition'. The new art, but recreation on old patterns (sometimes referred to as 'neo-traditional'[39]) and the Aryan ideal constituted new forms with an artificially created connection with the past. As Hobsbawm points out, inventing tradition is essentially a process of formalisation and ritualisation, defined by reference to the past—if only repeating.[40] Such repetition and recall appeared in Bengal at that time. The invented traditions have the power to sanction new forms through their connections with the past, often idealised, and therefore created. Thanks to this, they are a tool for preserving power and dismissing potential criticism. Hobsbawm claims that such traditions are evidence of problems and social changes. They are also of great importance for the concept of 'nation' and related phenomena, such as nationalism, national state, national symbols, national history.[41] The artificially created world of the invented tradition of ideal art and the ideal woman acted as a double strategy: nationalist, therefore anti-colonial, and—by creating ideal visions of womanhood and thus blocking reforms—anti-feminist.

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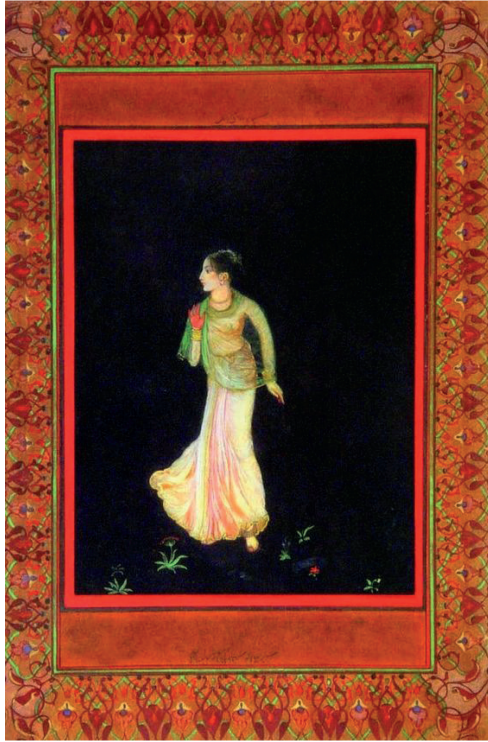

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5. Sati, Nandalal Bose, private collection

6. Three women, Mukul Dey, 1922, Victoria and Albert Museum, London