

## Narrating an Ambiguous Dream: Diminishing Border between Private and Public in *Woman Plucking Flowers* (1994)

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### 1. Introduction

Narrating pictures is perhaps one of the most frequent acts throughout Indian history, from Pata-Chitra tales to Hamzanama paintings, even to Ramayana TV series. All heroic legends require storytellers: the Patua artisans, Mughal courtesans, or Doordarshan actors and actresses, to re-enact the legendary plots and complete the pictorial representation with their speech. The word *narrate* then raises the following questions: Who is the agent of the narrating act? Who is the recipient/addressee? What kind of stories are narrated? What is the impact of this narration, allegorical, memorial, or even political?

In the following sections, I would argue that Arpita Singh provides her own answers to the previous questions on *narration* in her 1994 oil painting, *Woman Plucking Flowers* (Fig. 1). Combining oil paint, a modern medium, with the ornamenting techniques frequently used in local textiles, Singh fabricates her narration of a female protagonist surrounded by various repetitive signs, including domestic (e.g., flowers, gardens) and exogenous ones (e.g., guns, planes). However, these ambiguous and contradicting signs separate Singh's narration from the allegorical aims mentioned above, with her narration itself resting in the illusionary subconscious field but at the same time reflecting certain aspects and events of the reality, especially how violence intrudes and blurs the boundary between public and private space.

### 2. Integrating Oil Paintings and Bengal Textiles

Selecting oil painting as her medium, Singh sets her narration on a rectangular stage of blossoms in shades of

blue and purple impasto, filling every inch of the central canvas with sumptuous details in a near *horror vacui* manner.<sup>1</sup> Through the cross-marks and hatch lines inside every circular flower pattern in the central garden space, one could almost imagine how the artist applies touches of paint onto the canvas, which Geeta Kapur likens to a pastry chef icing cakes and a mason smearing mortar.<sup>2</sup> With the thick and uneven layers of paint highlighting the surface texture, the gleaming softness of oil pigment also connotes both the equally smooth female skin or woven textile, emphasizing its tactile quality.<sup>3</sup> Yet, the luminescent colors constantly question the physical existence presented by the thick paint layers, indicating the abstract, unearthly side of the pale female body glowing soundlessly inside the bed of flowers.

The border, also formed by white flowers in triangular pots, defines the garden's spatial boundary with curvy stems and leaves. The triangular pots, or mere triangle patterns, continue to appear inside and divide the encompassed space into an organized and flattened grid. Dalmia associates the triangular forms with "sexual symbols," possibly relating to the downward-pointing trikona that symbolizes femininity and the *yoni*.<sup>4</sup> Evenly spaced, these triangles form a rhythmic composition and recall specific decorative Bengal textile patterns, with reference to Singh's early working experience inside the fabrication faculty during the Rural Cottage Industry revitalization in Nehru's first five-year plan.<sup>5</sup> Here, the integration of textile patterns into oil painting becomes Singh's answer towards the opposition between modernity and local art practice. Recalling previous figures like K. G. Subramanyan, who adopts terracotta in the public mural-making, Singh's textile choice suggests a closer relationship with the artist's female identity, connoting the minute

1 Geeti Sen, "Woman In Red: Arpita Singh" in *Image and Imagination: Five Contemporary Artists in India* (Ahmedabad: Mapin Pub. Pvt., 1996), 114–5.

2 Geeta Kapur, "Body as Gesture: Women Artists at Work," in *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (New Delhi: Tulika, 2001), 40.

3 Apinan Poshyananda, "Roaring Tigers, Desperate Dragons in Transition," in *Contemporary Art in Asia: Transitions/Tensions*, (New York: Asia Society Galleries, 1996), 41.

4 Yashodhara Dalmia, "Arpita Singh: Of Mother Goddesses and Women," in *Expressions & Evocations: Contemporary Women Artists of India* (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 1996), 73. Dahmen-Dallapiccola and Anna Libera, *Dictionary of Hindu Lore and Legend* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 199.

5 Ella Dutta, *Tying Down Time* (New York: Talwar Gallery, 2018), 6.

embroidery and stitching of the female's domestic labor. Whether Bengal *kanthas* or *pichhavaï*, Singh adopts the method and logic of textile narration through fabricating her stories on the surface of repetitive motives, similar to Sheikh's comment, "for Arpita our tapestry weaver, repetition is the warp of invention."<sup>6</sup>

### 3. Ambiguous Narration: Presenting Pata-Chitra Without Narrating Patua

Against the sea of repetitive blossoms, two contrasting figures emerge on the diagonal line: one is a naked woman carved out in explicit contour in the upper-left corner of this ethereal garden, and the other is an armed man in fine suits with his outline blending into the bluish background. As the man points his gun in the direction of the woman, the artist suggests certain tension between these two characters, yet both characters' gestures remain ambiguous. The suited man might either attempt to shoot, with his eyes closed in hesitation, or have already performed the shot, since only the gun is present while the bullets are absent. Meanwhile, the woman might either be bending down her back, "plucking flowers" as her final gesture before the gunshot, or lying on her side, eyes closed and blood lost, as a consequence of this violence.

Time is ambiguous inside this narration of violence: This gunshot might be an event about to happen, a documentation of scenes already happened, or a fantastic illusion not going to happen. Singh only captures a transient moment and isolates it from its original story with an artificial frame, which "signify the process of completion" but "in itself incomplete."<sup>7</sup> Elongating the transient moment into a delicate painting, this act of narration in frames reminds the viewers of the narrative Pata-chitra scrolls that construct the tale of Hinduism Pantheon in successive scenes and reappearing characters.<sup>8</sup> However, Singh does not provide a clear storyline or a recording of plots accompanying her painting. Her images remain open to interpretations as she detaches the reoccurring objects from their original context, repeating and transforming them into assimilated patterns. Though providing plentiful clues in forms, narration, and signs, Singh's narration in nature defies the attempt to grasp a definite, chronological, linear interpretation, with "many beginnings and no end."<sup>9</sup> Viewers only perceive the painting as an ambiguous part

of a Pata-Chitra painting without the patua's fluent and continuous narration. The frame defines the painting's border and declares the termination of the scene, but the viewers, perplexed by Singh's ambiguous narration, are now eager to find a previous and the next frame, other scenes, as an explanation for this violent act.

### 4. The Evolving Signs inside a Lucid Dream

Phillip S. Rawson describes the Indian painting practices as revealing "something hidden somehow behind the surface."<sup>10</sup> In the same way, Singh also reveals the motions hiding inside the originally inanimate objects: Plants spread and overgrow on every inch inside the border, with the visible brushstrokes capturing their dynamics. Inanimate objects also transform and assimilate with each other, as we see the *trikona* similar to flower pots, airplanes similar to flying fish. Kapur compares this animism with Alice in Wonderland and describes her narration as "living in Alicetime."<sup>11</sup> Singh performs subverting treatments, animating the initially motionless objects and freezing the acts of the initially moving human figures, as the woman sleeps and the agent hesitates. Sheikh ascribes Singh's contrasting representation to her overt expression as "the celebration" of liveliness and imagination at the surface, but a "disguise" for her fear of death.<sup>12</sup>

As a metaphor for transiency itself, flower, especially white ones, is a sign that frequently appears throughout Singh's works for over 50 years: Living-room cut flowers in *Apples and Chairs* (1968), magnolias in *Figures & Flowers* series (1971), the decorative patterns on the female protagonists' clothes in her 80s watercolors, potted flowers witnessing the mourning moment of the Kidwai family (*Munna Kidwai and her Dead Husband*, 1992), and in Durga's hand for the praying woman (*Durga*, 1993). Kapur associates these flowers with a "gesture of grief" or "funeral postures" of soundless mourning, often co-occurring with lying bodies, white sari, widowhood, and closed eyes.<sup>13</sup> In *Woman Plucking Flowers*, however, the blossoms are not withering but replicating everywhere inside the garden, though its tendency to bury the lying woman still echoes the mourning practice of offering bouquets.

In her oil paintings and watercolor series, Singh also reuses her characters throughout the series, as we witness her

6 Kapur identifies these two kind of textiles in her article, see Kapur, "Body as Gesture," 42; Nilima Sheikh, *Arpita Singh* (New Delhi: Vadehra Art Gallery, 1994), 2.

7 Sheikh, *Arpita Singh*, 4.

8 Frank J. Korom, *Village of Painters: Narrative Scrolls from West Bengal* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2006), 32.

9 Sheikh, *Arpita Singh*, 1.

10 Though this sentence comes from "Thematic issue #2" in lecture slides, I consulted the copy of Art Now in India in Asian Art Archive to find the exact page number, but there is no article under Philip S. Rawson's name.

11 Bernhard Fibicher, Gopinath Suman, and Kunstmuseum Bern, *Horn Please: Narratives in Contemporary Indian Art* (New York: Hatje Cantz, 2007), 19.

12 Sheikh, *Arpita Singh*, 2.

13 Kapur, "Body as Gesture," 48.

naked woman growing through her puberty, adulthood, and motherhood.<sup>14</sup> Unlike the distorted and infinitely elongated time in narration, the female protagonist experiences time on an earthly scale. Though her strength wavers between the bellicose Martial Goddess and the vulnerable nude, the female protagonist substitutes the male gods and heroes in previous narrated legends, as Singh, self-identified as a female artist, departs her open-ended narration filled with textile patterns.<sup>15</sup>

## 5. Borders Violated: Between the Public and Private Space

Concerning “flowers” in the title, viewers often interpret the setting as a garden in the same way as the inscription “GARDEN” at the top of the painting. On a closer inspection, this seemingly plausible interpretation might lack solid visual evidence like consistent perspectives or architectural structures. Both characters float above an abstract bluish space where the floral motifs repeat in unearthly fluorescent colors fantasy, as an illusionary and dream-like space without a firm surface. Though still figurative and storytelling, *Woman Plucking Flowers* differ from her contemporary artists, especially the narrative works exhibited in *Place For People* (1981). While Singh’s paintings, as discussed before, often include abstract and thus non-referent backgrounds, the figurative and narrative works inside *Place For People* are often situated in specific cities or open-air plazas, with realistic architectural detail depicted in miniature perspectives.

Reasons for explaining this contrast could lie in either Singh’s textile practices, or her dreamy narration deprived of buttressing tales, but I would like to attribute their setting difference to another layer of gendered distinction, as Singh depicts the private space that receives the intrusion from the public space to document the constantly dissolving border between these two spaces.

The intruding elements are clearly recognizable, as they all cross the garden border. Planes fly across the inscription, ready to perform an emergency landing; The suited agent stands outside the garden but holds out his gun, aiming inside. These symbols, heterogeneous to the native domestic signs inside (e.g., flowers), pose a threat to the peaceful garden with the woman’s quiescent repose. The question then becomes: When and where does Singh adopt them? With her paintings’ dream-like quality, Singh possibly regards the machinery as exogenous stimuli, based on the consistently ongoing conflicts and riots in Indian, and then weave these warp of invention inside her painting

as a subconscious reaction, recognizing them as potential sources of threat with their accompanying violence. If one recalls Indira Gandhi’s death in 1984, a decade before this painting’s completion, then the garden setting and the armed agent in *Woman Plucking Flowers* might coincidentally echo Gandhi’s private garden and her Sikh bodyguards who committed this assassination. Yet, Singh substitutes the working prime minister, a public figure, with an anonymous crouching woman, her nakedness resisting any interpretation of her social economic class. In addition to the violent commotion against the Sikh community triggered by this assassination, the violence might relate to the Ayodhya Riot in 1992, another religious conflict between Muslims and Hindus.<sup>16</sup> Regardless of sources, the artist might visualize her own traumatic experience of violence into the incursion across one’s private border in this painting.

On the other hand, Singh might also be reclaiming public space through her illusive representation mingling the subconsciousness and reality together. Karode and Sawant define the external space as the “space of the urban realm” and the internal space as “space of individual subjectivity,” leading us to categorize dreams about urban life.<sup>17</sup> Similar to the violence’s intrusion inside the private gardens, we could interpret Singh’s Wonderland-ish depiction of enlivened cities without time, gravity, and perspective, as the reversed intrusion from the internal space to the external one.

## 6. Conclusion

To summarize the previous discussion, the artist integrates the repetitive and decorative patterns of Bengal textile into oil practices, which responds to the ongoing modern-local confrontation from the perspective of a female domestic labor. While the traditional textiles and scrolls often depict stories with straightforward plots about male protagonists, Singh’s oil painting narrates the female protagonist’s story with a rather ambiguous approach, playing around transforming signs and animated objects. In *Woman Plucking Flowers* (1994), specifically, the abstract and luminously bluish background without any consistent perspective embellishes the painting with an illusionary, dream-like setting, in stark difference to its contemporary solid architectural structures. Numerous symbols float above this illusionary background, including the interspersing trikona, overgrowing flowers, and garden borders. Though the tension between the two characters remains open to discussion, Singh arranges definite contrast between them: one is a naked and vulnerable woman, the other is an armed and properly-dressed man. Instead of a mere coincidence,

14 Kapur analyzes the protagonist’s growth thoroughly in her essay. See Kapur, “Body as Gesture,” 49–50.

15 Poshyananda, “Roaring Tigers,” 41.

16 While Sen refers back to the 1984 Delhi riot as assassination aftermaths, Poshyananda attributes the violent stimuli to the 1992 Ayodhya Riot, see Sen, “Woman In Red,” 119; Poshyananda, “Roaring Tigers,” 41.

17 Roobina Karode and Shukla Sawant, “City Lights, City Limits: Multiple Metaphors in Everyday Urbanism,” in *Art and visual Culture in India, 1857–2007* (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 2009), 203.



this gender distinction is more likely becarefully arranged, as Singh reacts to the external stimuli of traumatic conflicts and reflects them through the intruding elements like planes and armed agents.

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## Figure



**Figure 1**

Arpita Singh, *Woman Plucking Flowers*, 1994  
Oil on canvas, 60" x 66", New Delhi,  
Vadehra Art Gallery. Image by courtesy of  
the artist.