

A Feminist Focus in Indian Painting

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The painting of some artists of modern India has given cause for reflection on the lives of Indian women. Painting in modern India has tended to be a representational and socially-conscious art. Not all of it by any means: one could point out that the whole gamut of international styles in painting has been reflected in India. But many Indian artists have rejected "abstract" art as not appropriate for them in their situation¹ and in the late sixties and through the seventies there has been a marked development of an art which expresses quite directly the social awareness and social concerns of artists.² Indian painting of this period has documented poverty,³ alienation,⁴ and social violence,⁵ particularly in urban India.

Perhaps it is inevitable that in creating an art of this sort some artists should have turned their attention to Indian women. The patriarchal structures of Indian society are well-known as are the customs of the traditional society which have restricted or oppressed women - for example, the marriage of girl children, the seclusion of women, the denial of educational opportunities and the refusal to allow widows to remarry. A new day seemed to have dawned with the emergence of women into public life in the Independence Movement and in the post-Independence era. The present Prime Minister, Mrs. Gandhi, has seemed in herself to constitute proof that Indian women have attained a new status in modern India. And, indeed, Indian women have made remarkable gains. There are strong and competent women in public life. But the 1975

report of the National Committee on the Status of Women in India tended to show continuing problems for women and a deteriorating situation in some areas. The Committee reported continuing evidence of the marriage of child brides.⁶ It found that female mortality in most parts of the country was higher than that of men,⁷ that female literacy lags behind that of men,⁸ and that the representation of women in the labour force has actually markedly declined in recent years.⁹ The Committee considered the apparent cause of some of these trends; for example, that female mortality could be related to female nutrition,¹⁰ which was itself related to perceptions of the inferior worth of women. It found that a continuing general problem for women was one of role expectations: "A woman is still primarily associated with the home ... Decision-making for the community and the exercise of political power is still regarded as an exclusive male preserve."¹¹ Commitments to the education of girls are of course hampered by views of this sort. The report of the National Committee on the Status of Women was the result of a four-year inspection of the condition of women in Indian society. The perceptions of some painters since that time "take up the tale."

Indeed, while the Committee was still sitting, one Indian painter addressed himself to the issue in paint. Maqbul Fida Husain is probably the best known of modern Indian painters. He is a man of protean creativity who has been called "the Indian Picasso" and who frequently paints topical works. He produced in 1974 a work entitled

Cage 7, which now hangs in the National Gallery of Modern Art in Delhi. It shows on the right side a naked female form squatting in claustrophobic confinement - regarded from the other side of the painting by a bearded male figure holding a highly metaphorical bird in a cage!

The case of Husain is apposite here, not only because of the contemporary relevance of *Cage*. This "statement" is exceptional for him and its existence highlights the degree to which Husain's art incorporates a traditional image of woman, one which must constitute a major block to any realistic focus on women in India. The traditional image of woman envisions her as "earth mother": an ample, sensual, chthonic form evoking at one and the same time an aesthetic and sensuous response. The evolution of this image in the long history of Indian traditional art has been described by Heinrich Zimmer, and in describing it he more than once makes reference to its continuing appeal, as when he says of a slender *Parvati* of Elephanta Temple that her form retains "something of the sweet heaviness - that more robust substantiality - which remains to the end the fundamental Indian requirement of woman."¹² Husain's art over the years has incorporated the monumental conception of the female figure which he is said to have discovered in the temple statuary of Khajuraho.¹³

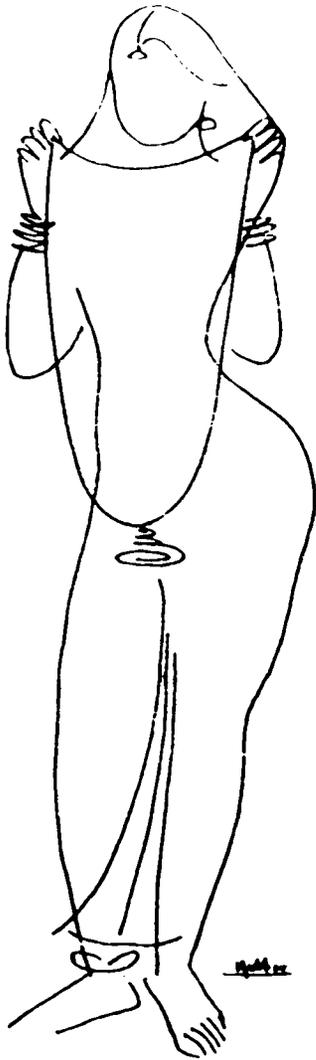
Artists of the present day who focus in a realistic way on the situation of women, or on the personhood of women, are rebels against the traditional image which is pervasive outside the domain of Fine Arts - in films and in advertising, for example - and which continually recurs in painting. Naren Panchal, mentioned in a survey of young artists by the *Illustrated Weekly of India* a few years ago,¹⁴ does nudes of statuesque proportions. They are splendid images. The difficulty with them when considering the historical fate of women is that the image treats women in impersonal terms, in what has become a cliché linking woman with nature, a cliché rein-

forced - in the best examples of the genre at any rate - by its sensuous appeal. By contrast, the feminist focus described in this article relates directly to women in their social situations or in the uniqueness of their persons.

Not that the convention is incapable of subserving honesty and compassion! Another of India's well-known artists, Krishna Hebbar,¹⁵ is a master of the evocative and sensuous line which is a hallmark of Indian art from the earliest ages. The traditional image of woman as "earth mother," splendidly ample, like early representations of Lakshmi, goddess of abundance, is found in some of the drawings of Hebbar,¹⁶ though a taut line and trim figure prevails in the depictions of women in his paintings. But Hebbar happens also to be one of the artists of contemporary India whose work has exhibited, over time, a lively social awareness.¹⁷ The traditional image of woman is implicit in one of his paintings, *City Life*, of 1968. Yet the painting goes far beyond the evocation of the traditional image. It poignantly evokes the situation of the destitute woman in a modern Indian city. This use of the image is, again, exceptional.

Another version of the traditional image of woman found in modern painting is less sensuous. It realizes the decorative values of female figures, usually as adjuncts to landscape. Thus one finds "village women" portrayed by many Indian artists, particularly those of the "old school" of the period before Independence. The Bengali artist Jamini Roy presented lush figures of "tribal girls" at an early stage in his career. N. S. Bendre, a senior and justly respected Indian artist and teacher of art now living in retirement in Bombay has painted many evocations of rural India, *Village Women* being the title of one of them. These paintings are masterful compositions, immensely decorative. But in them the creative imagination abides within aesthetic and artistic conventions and refrains from any probing insight.

Perhaps the Indian artist best known for portrayal of "village women" in this soft focus is herself a woman, Mrs. B. Prabha, also of Bombay. An early painting of hers, reproduced in a book on modern Indian art,¹⁸ did in fact appear to express an insight into the real conditions of the lives of village women. But a large volume of work produced since that time has presented essentially romantic images of women in agreeable compositions.¹⁹ Mrs. Prabha's work does not appear to be feminist in any sense. And it is at least arguable that a lack of seriousness of intent in the execution of many of these works vitiates their quality as art.



Where then is a feminist focus in Indian painting? One finds it emerging at an early stage in the development of modern Indian painting. A key figure in breaking the traditional stereotype of women in art, and a key figure as well in setting Indian painting on the more rigorously "realistic" course it has tended to follow ever since, was Amrita Sher-Gil; her pioneering influence has been recognized by a small gallery of her works in the National Gallery of Modern Art in Delhi. She was born in 1913. She studied art in Paris where she was especially influenced by the style of Paul Gauguin. Returning to India she succeeded in using her imported style as a vehicle for representation of and reflection upon her Indian experience.²⁰ In doing so she rejected the romantic image of woman as well as the self-conscious traditionalism of the contemporary Bengal School of Indian art.²¹ While many of her paintings convey qualities of traditional life, her studies of human figures are realistic and disenchanting. Paintings of "hill" men and women convey what must be seen as the sad, uncultivated, unused quality of their lives. It would seem, from a feminist point of view, that this was a salutary disenchantment. Amrita Sher-Gil, tragically, did not live to consummate the development of her own art as she died in 1941.

UNTITLED DRAWING by Krishna Hebbar

Amrita Sher-Gil had a direct influence on some painters of the post-Independence era,

however, with Krishna Hebbar being conspicuous among them. And while she is by no means the sole predisposing influence to this orientation,²² it could be said that the quality of her vision is intensified in painters who enquire today into the human condition in India and who do not flinch from imaging urban poverty and social violence.

This directness of vision is found among artists from all parts of India but it achieves its most consistent and its most intense expression

in the painting of Calcutta, in what the Bengali art critic Sandip Sarkar has called "The Art Born of Crisis."²³ Nikhil Biswas (who died in 1966) and Bijan Chowdhury use the male figure to express the tensions and violence of their time. Shyamal Dutta-Ray turns a savage eye upon his city in depictions of ruined buildings, urban wastes and skeletal bovines and humans. In a water colour entitled *Newly Married Couple* he shows a village bride and groom amid the desolation of Calcutta.



NEWLY MARRIED COUPLE, watercolour by
Shyamal Dutta Ray

And it is here especially, among the painters of Calcutta, that one finds a feminist focus: a painting expressive of awareness of the condition of women. It may be seen in paintings by Isha Muhammed, a member of the Calcutta Painters group,²⁴ and Principal of the Government College of Arts and Crafts, Calcutta. Isha Muhammed is a skilled portraitist. But occasionally he produces paintings in which perceptions of Indian society are conveyed by metaphor. In April of 1981 he was working on a painting of his wife

and daughter seated together in what appeared to be a conveyance. The painting was provisionally entitled *Captivity* and the limitations impinging on mother and daughter were symbolized by a large padlock.

The feminist focus of Calcutta painting emerges more strongly in the works of Bikash Bhattacharjee. Bikash is a faculty member of the Government College of Arts and Crafts in Calcutta and has been for many years a member of



CAPTIVITY, partially complete painting by Isha Muhammed, April 1981, Calcutta

another major Calcutta group, the Society of Contemporary Artists.²⁵ He works in oils and has a formidable reputation among artists in Bengal for his mastery of the medium. He is even better known for the subject-matter of his paintings, however, in which he “holds up the mirror” to an essentially conservative Bengali society. “Nobody has ever so mercilessly and understandingly exposed the psyche of the urban intelligentsia of the Bengali middle class,” says a Bengali art critic.²⁶ The critic adds that the painting of Bikash reveals also “the potential experience of all little men.”²⁷ More to the point here, of course, is what his painting reveals of the potential experience of women.

In a series of paintings developed since the mid-seventies under the title *She*, Bikash looks at the women of Calcutta. These works have a quality of gritty *rapportage*. They are presented for the most part without metaphor or conspicuous interpretation - and one might add, without compassion. He often depicts middle class or “society” women: one such is shown unctuously snipping a tape at an “opening.” What becomes visible in these paintings is a deeply etched carnality, a grasping nature thinly veiled by costumes and roles of an accepted sort. There are also the inevitable prostitutes. Bikash does not like what he sees, apparently. One might ask, however, whether he sees enough: do not women fill some positive roles even in middle class society? But the paintings as they stand reveal the kind of stereotyping and restriction of the social roles of women exposed by western writers such as Germaine Greer²⁸ and Betty Friedan.²⁹

Some, at least, of these “reports” from the Calcutta milieu do have implications for an understanding of Indian society far beyond Calcutta. In *She and Evening Light*, a painting of 1979, Bikash reports on the segregation and isolation of women: a woman stands alone, holding a transistor radio in a desolate cityscape of rooftops. One should add in explanation that the segregation of women has been traditional in

parts of India and that the place where a woman lives much of her life may well be the rooftop of a house in an Indian city. Segregation in a genuinely traditional society need not imply isolation, but rather the company of other women. Isolation is experienced when traditional lifestyles are persisted in outside of traditional communities, in cities to which people come singly or in couples, leaving the joint family of the village or the countryside. Here women may experience the most devastating isolation and loneliness. This is true not only in India, particularly in new industrial cities such as Durgapur in West Bengal, but also in immigrant societies such as the United Kingdom and in Canada.

Other paintings in the *She* series also reach beyond Calcutta. *Dasi* (the designation in former times of a temple or religious prostitute) links religion with the sexual exploitation of women. In the painting a mask of a warm and sensuous face is superimposed on another mask and yet another. Behind them all is the face of the exploiter - fat, cynical, powerful - and, of course, male. Yet another painting is topical. In it Bikash reacts to a story of rape. On the lower level of the painting a politician sits staring from his portrait, his face suspicious, closed - but confident. Over his head a woman screams and fights her attacker. In conversation the artist mentioned a specific case in another part of India as the catalyst for this painting.

Are all of Bikash’s perceptions so negative? By no means. But some are deeply ambivalent in what they might suggest. This is the case with paintings in which Bikash uses representations of a Chola bronze of *Parvati*, wife of Siva. The famous South Indian bronzes were created from the tenth century. This one in particular is a lithely beautiful symbol of divine humanity. But in his paintings Bikash situates the figure in a number of improbably but indisputably Calcuttan settings, all reeking, so to speak, of decay. What does one infer? Is the symbol set forward ironically or does it make a statement to be

understood straightforwardly? Of course it is impossible to say, since artistic integrity resists a merely verbal interpretation of a painterly and artistic statement. But if a straightforward meaning is taken from these paintings they would have to say something like this: "The beauty that was once distilled into these images is still here - and is disregarded in this city and on its pavements."

In one painting at least Bikash appears to communicate a positive view of woman in her traditional role, and perhaps also of the tradition in creating and sustaining the role. The painting is called *Plantation* and is dated 1979. It shows a strong Hindu matriarch with a *tulsi* plant, sacred to Vishnu. But the dominant view of the situation of women in India to be derived from the paintings of Bikash is indeed a negative one in its reports of the oppression of women and its perceptions of distortions of female being.

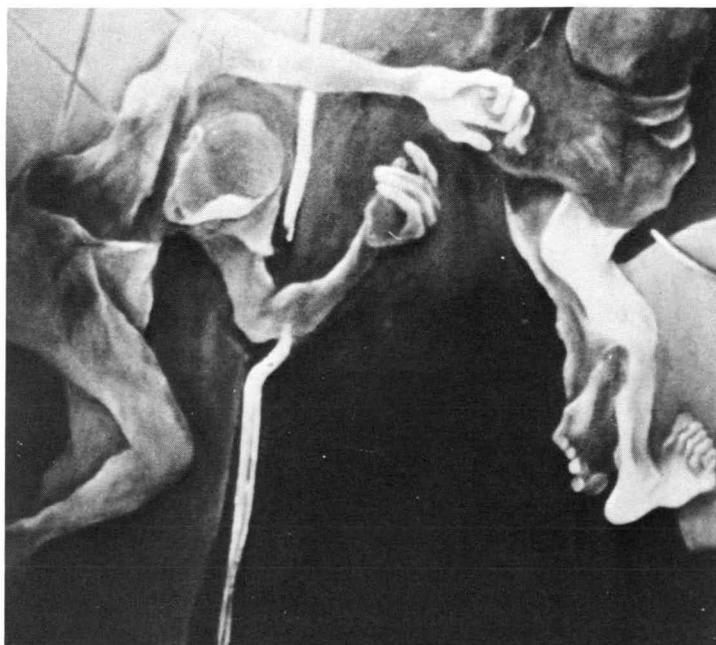
The same negative view completely dominates the work of another painter known for her treatment of the theme of women in Indian society. This is Nalini Malani of Bombay. She paints impressionistic portrayals of wan children and of smashed, disintegrating women. Her paintings are "social statements based on the female body, mercilessly violated, stripped, beaten, hammered" said an exhibition catalogue of 1981.³⁰ She has continued to develop this theme. A typical example of her work, *Sleeping Woman*, 1976, hangs in the National Gallery of Modern Art in Delhi.

The feminist focus of these artists does not present the whole truth about women in India but it cannot be denied that their work illuminates the human situation in a changing society still profoundly influenced by convention and dominated by the ethos of a patriarchal tradition. These artists penetrate and explode the stereotypes through which female being has been represented. But what of the future? The case of Amrita Sher-Gil may again be instructive for the

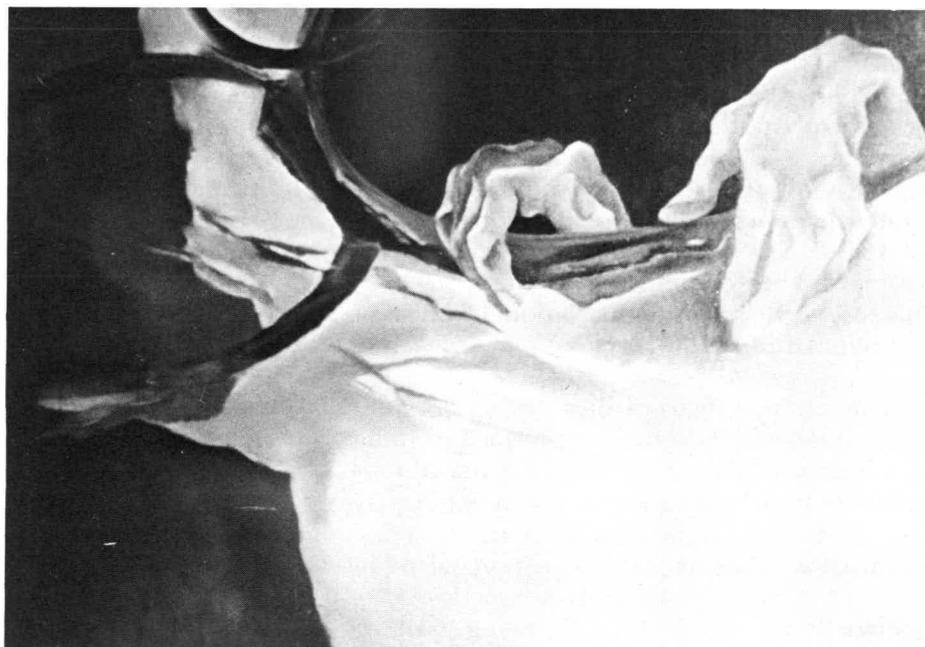
future of a feminist concern in the arts as well as in other fields. More truth about humanity (in this Indian art committed to humanity) may emerge as more women become artists and as women's seeing achieves creative statement. The number of women artists in India is now small as compared to the number of men,³¹ yet a number of promising figures are working in addition to those already mentioned in this essay. Two of them deserve mention.

Veena Bhargava of Calcutta has been painting since her days in the Government College of Arts and Crafts in the early sixties and has been exhibiting since 1969.³² Although not a member of any of the major groups in Calcutta she shares fully the orientation visible among artists of the Calcutta Painters and the Society of Contemporary Artists. Published drawings of 1970 react to the violence of that period in Calcutta.³³ A series of well-composed and painterly creations extending from 1975 to the present focusses on the infra-world of the Calcutta streets: her *Pavement* series. These paintings are not feminist works. Indeed, though her painting is representational to a degree, the figures of her paintings are sexless in a condition beyond gender and relationship. She is aware of the feminist movement; in conversation she expresses some sympathy with it, particularly because of her own experience with difficulties hampering a woman artist (the interruption of her development as an artist by marriage and child rearing, as well as the pressures created by her role as wife and mother). But the paintings of the *Pavement* series are not feminist. They might be described as "humanist": they are "about" human degradation, about the human condition without distinction of gender as it impinges on her through the streets of the city.

Meera Mukharjee is not a painter. She is probably the best known and most respected of the sculptors presently working in West Bengal. As is true with other artists whose work is described in this article, her work is figurative rather than



PAVEMENT 12, oil by Veena Bhargava, Calcutta



PAVEMENT 6, oil by Veena Bhargava, Calcutta



WORKSHOP IN THE SHADE, sculpture by Meera Mukharjee, Calcutta



PILGRIMS, sculpture by Meera Mukharjee, Calcutta

abstract. And it has a traditional base both in the technique and also in the imaginative content of her work. In a large retrospective exhibition of her work in Calcutta in 1981 one found, significantly, a representation of *Valmicki* done in 1976 (Valmicki was India's *adi-kavi* or "first-poet," the traditional author of the epic *Ramayana*) and a lighthearted depiction of an Indian musician, *Asad Ali on Veena*, (1978). Beyond that her work contains broad references to both traditional and modern life in evocations of village society (*Workshop in the Shade*, 1980, *Kite Festival*, 1979) and of India's characteristic form of modern transport (*Bus*, 1978 - definitely overcrowded). There are other creative statements

representing both men and women. What is remarkable about these works is their evocation of confidence and strength, a strength seen and represented in graceful figures of women quite as fully as it is seen and represented in figures of men.

The confidence and strength visible in the works of these two artists is a hopeful indication for the future of women in India. A serious and committed art reflects the dilemmas and failures of Indian society. But such an art seems likely also to devise new and more positive accounts of female being in India.



THOUGHT, sculpture by Meera Mukharjee, Calcutta

NOTES

1. "Pure abstraction may be possible with a European mind, but it is not relevant to our way of life, which is so very different": Bengali artist Prokash Karmakar as reported by Ajit Kumar Datta, "Conversations with Artists," *Lalit Kala Contemporary* 17 (n.d.), p. 22.
2. Several issues of the Indian 'Fine Arts Academy' publication *Lalit Kala Contemporary* show this, but see especially Krishna Chaitanya, "Art and the Predicament of Man," *Lalit Kala Contemporary* 24-25, September 1977 - April, 1978, pp. 16-21.
3. Indian artists K.K. Hebbar, B.R. Panesar, Shyamal Dutta-Ray and Veena Bhargava, for example.
4. Alienation is hard to "document" but Ram Kumar, Bhupen Khakhar, Tyeb Mehta, Ganesh Pyne and others convey the experience in different ways.
5. Chandrasekhar, P.T. Reddy, Doraiswamy, Krishen Khanna, Bijan Chowdhury, Nikhil Biswas, Prokash Karmakar, Robin Mondol and others.
6. "In rural areas the marriage of very young girls is still quite prevalent": The Indian Council of Social Science Research, *Status of Women in India* (A Synopsis of the Report of the National Committee on the Status of Women, 1971-4, New Delhi, Allied Publishers Private Ltd., 1975), p. 29.
7. *Status of Women in India*, pp. 143-145 and Tables 3-7, Appendix.
8. *Status of Women in India*, p. 94, and Table 19, Appendix, p. 155.
9. *Status of Women in India*, pp. 60-62.
10. "Cultural insistence on early marriage, high fertility, idealization of the roles of mother and housewife affect her physical and mental health. According to our Survey, 48.53% respondents state that women serve the family first and eat last. In poor families this results in even greater malnutrition of women. This process of subservience starting at an early age, taboos and restrictions which start with menstruation, and reluctance to consult a doctor, particularly a male doctor, result in a general neglect of women's health." *Status of Women in India*, p. 119.
11. *Status of Women in India*, p. 28.
12. Heinrich Zimmer, *The Art of Indian Asia* (Bollingen Series, Princeton University Press, 1955), I, p. 86.
13. Geeta Kapur, *Contemporary Indian Artists*, (New Delhi, Vikas Publishing House, 1978), p. 141.
14. Nissim Ezekiel, "Young Painters of Promise," *Illustrated Weekly of India*, Vol.XCV, 29, September 15, 1974.
15. See Hebbar's account of his own artistic development, K.K. Hebbar, *An Artist's Quest* (New Delhi, Abhinav Publications, 1974).
16. See illustration.
17. S.I Clerk, "Hebbar's Concern with Man," *Lalit Kala Contemporary*, 24-25, 1977-78), pp. 40-41.
18. "So long as I breath, I hope" a painting showing a mother and child in a village setting: P.R. Ramachandra Rao, *Contemporary Indian Art* (Hyderabad, published by the author, 1969), Plate 83.
19. Numbers of her paintings were seen by the author in the Dhoomimal Gallery in New Delhi in 1978.
20. See K.G. Subramanyan, "Amrita Sher-Gil and the East-West Dilemma," *Moving Focus* (New Delhi, Lalit Kala Akademi, 1978), pp. 81-88.
21. See Jaya Appasamy, *Abanindranath Tagore and the Art of His Times* (New Delhi, Lalit Kala Akademi, 1968).
22. A realism at odds with the idealising tendencies of Indian artistic tradition appears with the Moguls and emerges again in the 19th and early 20th centuries. See Pranabranjan Ray, "To Carry the Roots in the Veins," *Lalit Kala Contemporary*, 24-25, (1977-78), pp. 8-15.
23. Sandip Sarkar, "The Art Born of Crisis," *Lalit Kala Contemporary*, 29, April, 1980, pp. 22-25.
24. One of the two largest groups of Calcutta artists, founded in 1963.
25. The other of the two largest groups of Calcutta artists, established in 1961.
26. Pranabranjan Ray, in "To Carry the Roots in the Veins," *Lalit Kala Contemporary*, 24-5, (1977-78), p. 14.
27. *Ibid.*
28. Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (London, MacGibbon and Kee, 1971).
29. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York, Norton, 1963).
30. Reported in the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, September 15, 1974 (note 14, above) p. 6.
31. *The Artists Constituency Electoral Roll of 1975* (New Delhi, Lalit Kala Akademi) lists 103 women among a total of 869 artists.
32. She has exhibited in Calcutta, Bombay and New Delhi, and had her work included in an exhibition of contemporary Indian painting held in Yugoslavia, Poland and Belgium in 1973-4.
33. See *Lalit Kala Contemporary*, 24-25, (1977-78): "Victim," an ink drawing facing p. 18.