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Forgotten Sisters

Rewriting Women into Indian Art History

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Abstract : “It’s a man’s world”— a phrase even if problematic from the beginning, has a seed of truth to it. In the realm of achievements and discoveries mostly the result of man, do the accomplishments of women receive equal celebration oftentimes? The massive accolades received by man, the books not only of his accomplishments but of his existence, outweigh the scale by an exponentially larger number than those by women. The paper seeks to bring to the foreground a couple of such women, borrowing from the premise of Virginia Woolf’s monumental text ‘A Room of One’s Own’¹, in which she talks about the differentiation of the sexes. Judith, the hypothetical sister of Shakespeare, she imagines as equally capable and aspiring, but raising the question of whether she might’ve survived the patriarchal system of society. Would she’ve been just as famous as her brother? Woolf seriously doubts it herself.

This observation can be extended to the Indian artistic world. The subcontinent celebrates renowned male artists such as Raja Ravi Varma and Abanindranath Tagore, names so prominent that even those distantly familiar with art history cannot escape their presence. They are rightly credited with shaping Indian art and making history in ways that would have been vastly different without them. Yet, what about their sisters? Does anyone even faintly remember their names, their artistic practices, or whether they were allowed the same creative pursuits at all? Unlike Judith, they were not fiction, but reality, real women whose existence and contributions were ignored and erased over the years.

Keywords : Indian women artists, Indian art history, feminist critique

¹ Virginia Woolf, A Room of One’s Own (Hogarth Press, 1929).

Introduction

Virginia Woolf, striding the turfs of Oxbridge², was reminded of her womanhood; inherently inferior to her male colleagues. She might be allowed access to the gardens, but the turf itself was set aside, an unobtrusive indicator of exclusion, for scholars and fellows. Leafing through the pages of *A Room of One's Own*, one can discover that Woolf does not ask to be afforded the vindication of the contributions of women; that was a task too great in itself. Rather, she asks, seemingly unpretentiously, but metaphorically apt, for a room. A room of one's own, in which a woman might perhaps create freely, in which her "little fish"³ of ideas might develop unhindered. In this request lies not just an unmasking of the sexed restrictions of the academy, but an exhalation of exasperation of being denied the space to create, the space to be an intellectual being.

And who was Judith? Shakespeare's fictional sister, created by Woolf. Just as ambitious, just as aspiring to travel the globe. She wished to act, she wished to write. But, unlike the brother, she was preordained to fail, not by want of talent but because she was a woman. The poet's heart was trapped in a woman's flesh, in the patriarchally-dominated world. Judith's fate, as narrated by Woolf, was poignant: she was laughed at, scoffed at, and, ultimately, went mad, taking her own life in obscurity. As Woolf indicates, "any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and scoffed" (Virginia 74). Judith's tale exists only in fiction, but she represents the countless silent voices of talented women through the ages. We may commiserate with her and now, in retrospect, imagine that we might do justice to her, but history itself swarms with such lost "sisters"—women who lived and breathed and existed, all too corporeally, but effaced by the constructs which denied them a role. Art history, for centuries, has been written from a vantage point that privileges male creativity while relegating women to the margins, as muses, models, or anonymous artisans, rather than as autonomous creators. The art historical canon, shaped in part by E.H. Gombrich's 'The Story of Art'; often regarded as a foundational text, makes no mention of women artists. Similarly, Giorgio Vasari's 'Lives of the Artists', a seminal compilation of artistic biographies, acknowledges only four women among the hundreds of male painters it celebrates. These

² Oxbridge is Virginia Woolf's collective term for the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge, employed as criticism of patriarchal formation of elite education. The "turf" here is that of the groomed lawns between college grounds, and it is symbolically set aside for the male Fellows and Scholars. Women did not belong and were instead relegated to the gravel walks, and this constraint emphasizes the gendered prohibitions of entry for intellectual and institutional spaces. Woolf invokes this image as criticism of how even spaces physically reflected the systemic exclusion of females from cognitive and cultural authority.

³ Woolf likens her fleeting thought to a "little fish" that is not yet fully formed, a metaphor for the delicate, tentative nature of creative ideas. Just as a fisherman returns a small fish to the water so it may grow, she suggests that some thoughts must be allowed to mature before they can be articulated or "served" to an audience. This image captures the process of intellectual gestation, where ideas may initially appear insignificant but hold potential for greater substance with time. When she was interrupted by the college Beadle to walk on turf, she thought that she lost her train of thoughts due to his enforced boundary.

omissions were not accidental, they reveal how art history was written through a patriarchal lens that celebrated male creativity while overlooking women altogether. By erasing their presence, such texts reinforced the idea that artistic genius was a male domain, leaving generations of women artists invisible in the very history they helped shape.

In the modern era, women were pushed to the margins of art history, their presence either minimized or erased altogether, as if artistic genius were the preserve of men alone. This male dominance left little room for female interpretation or consideration, and the fragmentary accounts of women artists that do survive remain “insufficiently investigated, undervalued, and under-appreciated.”⁴ Feminist thinkers like Virginia Woolf and Linda Nochlin exposed this exclusion, reminding us that the question was never about whether women had the capacity for artistic greatness, but whether society, institutions, and culture ever gave them the chance to realize it. To look at women artists, then, is not just about recovering forgotten names; it is about shifting the way we see and tell history. It means placing women’s experiences, voices, and struggles at the centre of inquiry. Recognizing their contributions is not simply adding them to an existing canon, but challenging the very foundations on which that canon was built. Art history must be understood not as an objective record of genius, but as a deeply contested space, where questions of power, gender, and culture determine who is remembered and who is silenced. As Virginia Woolf and Linda Nochlin remind us, the question is not whether women were capable of equaling men in artistic genius, but whether they were ever afforded the opportunity to do so. Nochlin just like Woolf, famously posed the provocative question: what if Picasso had been born a girl? Would his teachers have nurtured his talent with the same seriousness, or would he have been granted the same opportunities? The answer, inevitably, is no. In an era when women were denied even the most basic resources, such as access to the study of the male nude, it becomes difficult to sustain the romantic notion of the ‘great artist’ as a figure endowed with innate genius.⁵ This systemic deprivation operated as an invisible barrier to women’s recognition, ensuring that the mantle of greatness remained almost exclusively male.

This article sets out to retrieve the space of women artists by excavating the reason of their erasure, and examining the manner in which gender, inscribed in social and cultural structures, has dictated this elimination. It identifies the manner in which women artists experienced the fall of familial, institutional, and social structures, and ways in which women’s multiple roles necessitated to be fulfilled. Such an investigation unearths the interstices of private and public domains, which have come to become core to the practice and practice of women artists. Even in art historical writing, the very nomenclature artist has had a

⁴ Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” ARTnews

⁵ The term “Great Artist” refers to the myth of the artist as a solitary, godlike genius endowed with innate talent that inevitably manifests regardless of circumstance, a narrative central to traditional art history. Linda Nochlin critiques this very myth in her seminal essay, arguing that it obscures the social and institutional conditions that have historically excluded women from artistic recognition (Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” ARTnews, vol. 69, no. 9, Jan. 1971, pp. 22–39, 67–71).

gendering to it, implicitly speaking of men, and women, when spoken of, had to wear the badge of woman artist attached to them.

This paper takes an approach in examining the practices of two Indian women artists, Mangalabai Thampuratty and Sunayani Devi, whose lives and works were shaped by structures of patriarchal constraint but also mark significant departures from them. Mangalabai Thampuratty, one of the earliest recorded women painters in Kerala, negotiated her place in a cultural milieu that scarcely recognized women as intellectual or artistic agents. Sunayani Devi, emerging from the Tagore household in Bengal, developed a distinctive idiom rooted in folk traditions and spiritual themes, consciously resisting the academic realism endorsed by colonial art institutions. In both cases, the act of creating art itself becomes an assertion of agency, while their stylistic and thematic choices reflect subtle but powerful forms of subversion.

Much like Katy Hessel's 'The Story of Art Without Men', which reclaims overlooked women artists from the West, this study turns its attention to the artistic histories of two Indian women, Mangalabai Thampuratty and Sunayani Devi, whose practices remained on the peripheries of mainstream art history. By situating their work within the socio-cultural and institutional parameters that shaped and constrained women's artistic output, the paper seeks to challenge the very operations of erasure that have long defined the Indian art historical condition. Here, the woman is not the 'Other, history, throughout cast been often so has she as ⁶' but the subject herself. As Simone de Beauvoir famously asserted in *The Second Sex*, 'everything that men have written about women should be viewed with suspicion, because they are both the judge and the party.' Guided by such a perspective, this study not only highlights how the lives and practices of these artists reflect the structural barriers women faced, but also reveals the subtle and powerful ways in which they resisted invisibility, asserted their agency, and carved a space for themselves within a patriarchal order.

Methodology

This research utilizes a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach that synthesizes art historical research and feminist critique to study the artistic lives of Mangalabai Thampuratty and Sunayani Devi. It is an interpretative, rather than a quantitative, research design that seeks to reconstruct histories that are marginalized, lost, or excluded from mainstream art historical accounts. Data collection is a multiple-source endeavour: primary sources such as paintings attributed to the artists, which are found in museums, catalogue literature, and private archives; secondary sources such as published art histories, critical writings, and journals focusing on art and aesthetics, and catalogue of contemporary male artists such as Raja Ravi Varma and Abanindranath Tagore; and archival documents such as exhibition catalogues, institutional letters and memoranda, and contemporary writings attesting to the reception or non-reception of women artists within public culture. This analytical framework is guided by a feminist art historical criticism that

⁶ The term "Other" in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* refers to the way woman is defined only in relation to man, as inessential and secondary, while man is positioned as the Subject and the Absolute. In this framework, woman becomes the subordinate "Other," denied autonomous identity.

questions exclusion and othering mechanisms of patriarchal information systems and by contextual examination, which places the artists' practices within the overriding socio-political contexts of colonial modernity, cultural nationalism, and institutional in familial limitations. Comparative approaches serve to throw into sharp relief the asymmetries of visibility by comparing and contrasting the lives of these women with those of their men counterparts and, in doing so, exposing structural inequities of remembrance and recognition. The study acknowledges constraints inherent in reconstructing the whole legacy of these artists due to the scarcity of extant paintings and archival materials. These silences are instead regarded not as a void to be filled but testaments of systemic erasure to be critically interrogated in its own right. Every attempt has been made to resist the temptation of romanticizing the women as exceptions or aberrations and to place them, instead, as active members of wider cultural networks whose roles and contributions have been eclipsed by patriarchal models of art history.

Introducing the sisters

Raja Ravi Varma is celebrated as a genius who blended European realism with Indian traditions, creating a new path for modern Indian painting. His works are admired for their beauty, accessibility, and innovation, so much so that it's hard to imagine Indian art history without his name. But while the world remembers him, it has largely forgotten someone equally close and equally talented, his sister, **Mangalabai Thampuratty** (1866–1953). Like Judith in Virginia Woolf's allegory, Mangalabai had the skill, vision, and dedication to create remarkable art, but she lived in a world that would not allow her to claim her place. To forget someone is one thing; to barely acknowledge their existence is cultural erasure. Trained under her uncle Raja Ravi Varma and guided by her brothers, she learned oil painting within the cultural privilege of nobility. Yet this privilege was a double-edged sword. It gave her access to art but simultaneously denied her the freedom to participate in professional life. Noblewomen could paint, but they could not claim recognition.

Mangalabai's life reflects the paradox Woolf described in *A Room of One's Own*: for a woman to create lasting art, she needed not only talent and training, but also social and economic freedom. Mangalabai had a "room" in the form of her training and leisure, yet she could not step fully into the public space to assert her presence. Her brother's fame overshadowed her quietly, and her achievements were acknowledged only in whispers, not in the formal histories of Indian art. Despite this, she painted with unwavering dedication into her eighties. Interviews with Balakrishna Nair, Ravi Varma's biographer, capture glimpses of her life and creativity. She recalled moments when her brother sought her opinion on his own paintings, such as *Tripura Sundari*. Bound by social norms, she hesitated to speak, but when she did, he listened. These small acts reveal not only her talent but also her quiet assertion of agency within the restrictions placed on her. Like her brother, she was well-versed in oil painting. But beyond this fact, little is remembered, except that she "probably helped her brother"⁷ These terms speak to both her aesthetic vision and the barriers of

⁷ Shilpa Das - mangalabai the invisible artist and sibling of Raja Ravi Varma heritage lab

patriarchy that kept her from greater fame. Mangalabai Thampuratty may be overlooked by history, but she should be remembered not just as the sister of Ravi Varma but as an artist in her own right, one whose tale illuminates the suppressed women behind great men.

Feminist thinkers like Linda Nochlin remind us that artistic “greatness” is rarely innate; it depends on access to education, resources, and opportunities, things Mangalabai was denied simply because she was a woman. Griselda Pollock urges us to understand women’s contributions not by inserting them into a male-centered canon, but by looking at the conditions that shaped their invisibility. Mangalabai’s story is exactly this, she created, persisted, and left her mark, even as society tried to make her invisible. Only four of her works are formally documented today, though it is likely many more remain hidden in private collections. Her story is a testament to the countless women whose creativity was overshadowed by the men around them. Mangalabai was not just Ravi Varma’s sister; she was an artist in her own right, and remembering her is an act of reclaiming a voice that history tried to silence.



Fig. 1- Mangalabai Thampuratti with her painting of Raja Ravi Varma. Courtesy: The Heritage Lab.

Of those attributed to Mangalabai Thampuratti, her portrait of Raja Ravi Varma (see fig. 1) is layered with irony: her most recognized work is one that immortalizes her more celebrated brother. Yet, to reduce the painting merely to a deferential act of commemoration is to overlook the subversive register in which it speaks. Mangalabai’s brush renders Ravi Varma not only as the iconic artist of Indian modernism, but also as a subject of intimate, almost domestic regard. His stature as a public figure is tempered by the quiet tenderness of a sister’s gaze, humanizing him beyond the heroic frames in which men of his position were so often cast.

In doing so, Mangalabai destabilizes the patriarchal script that demanded women remain invisible, their creativity absorbed in service to male legacies. She inscribes herself into the narrative by choosing how Ravi Varma would be remembered, through her eyes, her hand, and her framing. The act of painting her brother, then, becomes a reversal of roles: the male artist, who so often cast women as muses or models, is here transformed into the subject, positioned within a woman's artistic vision.

Thus, what may appear as homage may also be considered an assertion. Mangalabai's portrait resists erasure by marking her authorship unmistakably, not as a shadow trailing Ravi Varma's fame but as a creator in her own right. By seizing the power to represent rather than merely to be represented, she carved space for a female gaze within a male-dominated artistic tradition, subtly unsettling the hierarchies that sought to confine her.

Though little is formally credited to Mangalabai Tampuratti, her life leaves an indelible imprint, reminding us of the need to foreground women artists in the historical narrative. Her quiet legacy extends beyond her own works; it paved a path for later women, such as Sunayani Devi, to explore and assert their creativity within the constraints of their social and cultural milieu.

Sunayani Devi (1875–1962), a self-taught artist from the Tagore family of Calcutta, represents another example of a woman whose artistic potential flourished in a context that was simultaneously privileged and limiting. As a member of the renowned Jorasanko family, she absorbed cultural stimuli from her immediate surroundings, especially the revivalist artistic atmosphere cultivated by her brother Abanindranath Tagore. Yet despite the cultural renaissance unfolding around her, Sunayani remained formally excluded from institutional training and professional recognition, the field of professional art was closed to women of her era.

Both Mangalabai and Sunayani experienced similar fates: their work was overshadowed by the towering reputations of the men in their lives. Mangalabai's contributions were subsumed under the fame of Raja Ravi Varma, while Sunayani's art was eclipsed by her brother Abanindranath Tagore, a leading figure of the Bengal School. Yet, unlike Mangalabai, Sunayani Devi was not merely a shadow of her family. While her brothers aimed to shape nationalist or modernist art movements, Sunayani charted a deeply personal path, drawing inspiration from folk and devotional traditions, including the Mughal miniature and Kalighat painting styles. Her naive yet evocative style, characterized by unbroken, flowing lines and an intimate attention to mythological narrative, reflects a deeply individual aesthetic sensibility.

As Stella Kramrisch observed:

"Forms she lacks, for she has grown. Unbroken and unbending is the stream of the lines, for no hesitation diverts them from the course which they take as they bubble from her real nature. Forceful and sluggish, self-assertive and full of abandonment, they pour forward in solemn quietude and encircle groups and figures."

Sunayani Devi's work emerges as a quiet rebellion against the patriarchal codes that confined women to the home while denying them recognition as artists. Where male painters of her era were celebrated for grand nationalist visions or modernist experimentations, Sunayani turned her gaze inward, to the rhythms of domestic life and the women who animated it. Yet this was no act of resignation. By choosing to represent women engaged in everyday acts, she redefined the boundaries of what could be considered worthy of art.



Fig. 2- Sunayani Devi, Milkmaids, c. late 19th century. Oil on canvas. Source: Indian Museum, Kolkata

In *Milkmaids* (Fig. 2), for instance, the scene of three women holding hands, draped in saris alive with vibrant purple, red, and blue, embroidered with gold, transcends mere documentation of rural routine. Their elongated eyes, softly turned toward one another, evoke solidarity, tenderness, and collective strength. This intimacy transforms what patriarchy might dismiss as the banality of chores into a vision of dignity and power. Sunayani's brush elevates women's communal labor from invisibility into artistry, insisting that their lives are not marginal but central to the cultural fabric.

By drawing from the everyday spaces women inhabited, courtyards, kitchens, temples, Sunayani inserted those silenced experiences into the canon of Indian modern art. In doing so, she subverted the very hierarchies that separated "serious" art from "domestic craft." While her brothers pursued nationalist and modernist projects, Sunayani constructed a visual archive of women's inner worlds and collective bonds, reclaiming the home not as a site of confinement but as a wellspring of creativity.

Her art, then, was not only an aesthetic practice but an ideological intervention. It challenged the patriarchal assumption that women could only be muses or symbols, never agents of representation. By painting women as subjects in their own right, imbued with intimacy, pride, and resilience, Sunayani asserted the legitimacy of the female gaze and expanded the very definition of what art could mean.

Feminist readings, informed by Woolf, Nochlin, and Pollock, illuminate the structures shaping women's artistic lives. Sunayani Devi, like Mangalabai, exemplifies Woolf's paradox, residing in a space rich with cultural resources yet denied the institutional support necessary for public recognition. Her work underscores how women's artistic practice was often confined to the private, domestic sphere and frequently erased from the official history of Indian modern art. By placing women like Mangalabai and Sunayani at the centre of inquiry, rather than as appendages to their more famous male relatives, we challenge patriarchal assumptions embedded in the canon. Their creativity was not incidental or derivative; it was deliberate, resilient, and reflective of their unique perspectives. Through a gynocentric lens, we can see their contributions not as peripheral footnotes, but as vital threads in the fabric of Indian art history, threads that demand recognition in their own right.

Both Mangalabai and Sunayani Devi exemplify the feminist critique's structures: women residing in spaces rich with cultural resources, yet denied institutional support, recognition, and professional visibility. Their artistic practice, often confined to the domestic or private sphere, was systematically erased from the canon, despite its originality and expressive power. The constraints they faced were not unique to India. Globally, women's artistic labor was often treated as leisure rather than serious creation. Privilege and access, while present, rarely translated into authority or public acknowledgment. Seen through a gynocentric lens, these patterns reveal how patriarchal institutions naturalized male dominance as the standard of artistic genius, obscuring women's creativity even when it flourished.

Little that we learn about them comes from others, Mangalabai through fragmentary historical references, and Sunayani through Kramrisch's critical testimony. But their tales highlight an ironic fact: the history of Indian art would be less than complete without women such as them. Their contributions opened the way to the succeeding fortunes of women artists who would take their due place within the country's cultural consciousness.

Recognizing Mangalabai and Sunayani is therefore not merely an act of historical recovery; it is a reclamation of agency. Their stories affirm that women's artistic talent has always existed, persisted, and shaped cultural landscapes, even when society refused to grant them the space, visibility, or credit they rightfully deserved. By placing these women at the centre of inquiry, rather than as appendages to male relatives, we see their work as vital threads in the fabric of Indian art history, threads that demand recognition in their own right.

Conclusion

In a society that paradoxically celebrates women as religious and cultural icons while denying them equal access to education and artistic opportunities, the story of women artists in India is one of repeated erasure and marginalization. The lives of Mangalabai Thampuratty and Sunayani Devi show how even women from privileged or aristocratic backgrounds, those with access to cultural resources, were still constrained by

patriarchal structures. Their experiences, though marked by relative privilege, make us imagine the challenges faced by women with fewer social and economic advantages, whose creative potential may have been stifled before it could even be expressed. For many, the chance to create, exhibit, or be recognized as an artist remained out of reach.

Throughout history, women's artistic labor has too often been trivialized. Work produced in domestic spaces was dismissed as a hobby, while those who pursued art alongside other responsibilities were labeled "non-artists." Such classifications excluded women from the realm of the "serious" artist, pushing their contributions to the margins of art history. The result is a persistent silence: women's experiences, expressed in their work, were denied acknowledgment, their voices muted within the canon. This was not limited to India. Across the world, women faced similar marginalization; in the West, for instance, Judith's artistic achievements were largely absorbed by her male contemporaries or simply ignored.

This paper does more than recover lost names. It critically examines the ways in which women's work has been erased and the ideologies that allowed this erasure to persist. Centreing artists like Mangalabai and Sunayani challenges the gendered hierarchies embedded in artistic canons. Their work was far from peripheral; it was a careful, complex negotiation of tradition and modernity, domestic life and imagination, a negotiation deserving of attention, respect, and rigorous study rather than condescension.

This study is an act of reclamation, a tribute to the sisters of Indian art who have long been overlooked. By placing them at the centre of discussion, it resists the tendency to let female artists fade into oblivion and asserts their rightful place in art history. Recognizing them is not an act of gracious inclusion, it is a correction of historical neglect. A complete account of Indian art cannot ignore the silences around women's creativity. In reclaiming their legacies, we do more than fill gaps in history; we challenge the very frameworks that have shaped what is remembered and valued. Women's creative voices are not peripheral, they are dynamic, central, and enduring, and they demand to be heard.

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