

Hemal Ashar

looks at an art exhibition which canvasses for new ways of representing women in painting.

Change Reaction

Indian women have always been stereotyped by classicists. Whether in literature or art, there has been a sweeping depiction of Indian womanhood. The woman has been achingly distant and desirable. In the other portrayal, she is a symbol of fertility and nourishment, put on earth primarily to further the human race.

The classic tradition gave way to the modern where in painting the woman was now depicted as a buxom beauty as seen in the work of Raja Ravi Varma or the folk flavour of a Jamini Roy. That stately old doyen of Indian painting, Amrita Shergil gave her work on women a langour, limbo-like quality where groups of women born of Shergil's brush had a pensive quality.

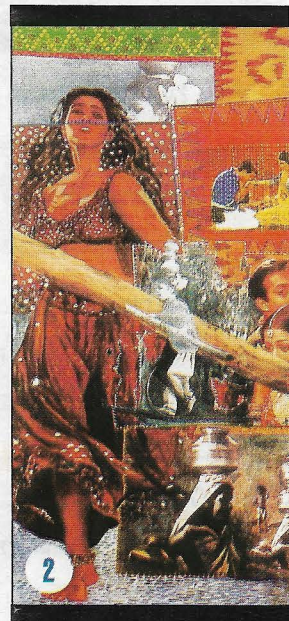
Now with several strokes of the brush, a group of women artists paint (quite literally) a picture of the contemporary woman. A recent exhibition of their work at the Tao art gallery in Mumbai titled 'Nayika' sought to comment and question the conventional mode of representation of women.

A strong sense of isolation is evident in some work, proving that the eternal loneliness of being in an increasingly depersonalized world is like all 'woman's issues or concerns' finally a human concern. Some vignettes of a show that portrays the new Nayika.

1 **Anupam Sud's** 'Autumn Nayika' in water colour and pastel is finely rendered. A soothing, quiet painting has a message — a poignant evocation of the passage of time.

The figure in the background trying to hold on to something, is as if one is trying to hold on to life itself and highlights the ephemeral quality of life.

2 **Meera Devidayal's** work titled 'The Bedspread' poses an uncomfortable social comment through a sharp juxtaposition of fantasy versus reality. On one hand, the woman is glorified as in celluloid, on the other she is still the little girl who grows into the woman of India's villages stuck in a time warp carrying buckets of water for many miles. While the life-sustaining liquid nourishes, ironically her life ebbs away in the constant physical hardship of finding water.



3

Lalitha Lajmi's 'My Nayika' displays a surface naivete and an overwhelming passivity. Pensive, self-absorbed and removed from her surroundings, this nayika exudes a deep sense of alienation and isolation. There are some clues to her protagonist's inner world — food and drink which is the need for life sustenance, the cat, the need for company and the mask which may be the mask she wears in her public persona.

4

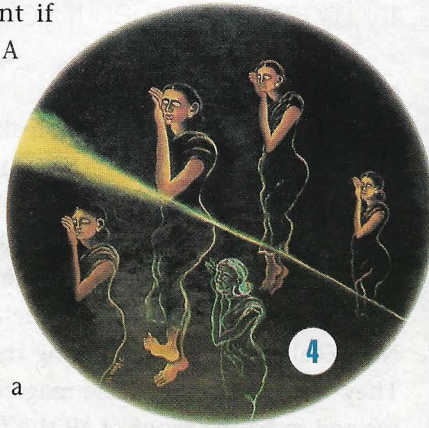
Arpana Caur's painting is titled 'Untitled' and the posture of sleep is used as a metaphor to comment on the passivity in women's lives. The ray of light slicing through her painting is a symbol that they can free themselves from the passivity and environment if they want to. A

strong symbol of hope in a dark world.

5

Gogi Saroj Pal's painting from her series

'Anandit Naika' is a



parody on the Nayika concept. The woman, against a lush saffron foreground and the green background may be a symbol of fertility, appears to be proffering herself. Pal's idea is to subvert the notion of woman as an object of pleasure. Pal's Nayika takes pleasure in her own body — 'she who does not give but takes metaphorical 'fruit' and devours it whole.' This breaks the common conception of woman as 'giver.'

6

Dhruvi Acharya titles her work 'Saturday Night.' The young artist places her protagonist within a *zenana*-like scenario. The whirl of activity around the central figure and the

wealth of detail give the painting a crowded, baroque-like quality. Amidst all this, the central figure stands out even more, a couch potato-like immobility which may be used to signify some women's lives today. ■

