

# Textural Aesthetics in the Avant-garde Art Practice of Nilima Sheikh and Rajyashri Goody

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**Abstract:** Deeptha Achar's text on the rise of the woman artist in India, indicates that formulating an aesthetic of the personal is a locus for defining the practice of contemporary women artists. Apropos visual art, textual material often forms an appeal to this aesthetics of the personal. In this paper, I propose to examine this intermedial exchange in the works of Nilima Sheikh and Rajyashri Goody. Their juxtaposed incorporation of literary extracts within the textures of visuality renders insight into the aesthetic creative process driven by emotional affect. While Sheikh's medium is painting, Goody employs a range of mixed media including ceramics, photographs, cookbooks, paper pulp as well as poetic texts. Their integration of literary narratives and poetry within the visual landscape creates a 'textural' aesthetics. Sheikh's paintings and Goody's installations/print both receive from, and re-represent the literary material them within the body of their works, thereby creating an aesthetics of intermediality.

Examining the "textural" aesthetics and its antecedent relation to the aesthetics of the personal raise implications of a historicization of their respective politics (Sheikh engages with narratives of Kashmir, migration/displacement, and dowry deaths, while Goody engages with caste issues). The study uses Sara Ahmed's theory of emotional affect to propose that reading the textual aesthetic, evokes a feminist method of "doing" or "re-doing". This opens further enquiries into the possibilities of intermedial exchanges within the reading of art and literature specifically concerning emotional affect and its evocative implications for feminist methods of doing and its politics.

*Keywords:* intermedial aesthetics, contemporary women artists, feminist art, literary aesthetics, Indian feminist art

## 1.1. Literary extracts and a visual aesthetics of the personal: An introduction to Nilima Sheikh and Rajyashri Goody's art practice

Artist Nilima Sheikh's work spanning over three decades of art practice has covered themes of political displacement, its trauma, and has consistently engaged with the experience of women caused by public and/or domestic unrest. Sheikh conceives her figurations on a large scale over scroll-like canvas sheets. Many of the exhibitions, uses space to invite the spectator to engage with stories both visual and literal. Her recent works use soft pastel shades of earthy blues, greens, reds and yellows indicating a sense of calm. However, almost always, these sober colours hold evocative reflections of trauma and memory (Sheikh, *Each Night Put Kashmir in Your Dreams*). Take for instance, the single scroll painting – *My Hometown* (2009), displayed at the *Woman is as Woman Does* show at CSMVS, Mumbai. There is a dominion of primary colours: a red figure raises his arms, head tilted to one side, his torso and feet are washed by a sea of blue<sup>1</sup>. Below this, the scroll splits into a different panel altogether – this time dominated by an androgynous figure in green, clutching a ripped chest (Sheikh, *My Hometown*). The red, gold and black tongues of fire above the red coloured figure, dissuades a reading of poetry that reflects romantic sensibilities – this work is alive, burning, and conveys pain.

In another scroll I have chosen for the analysis of this essay – *Across, from Terrain: Carrying Across Leaving Behind (2016-2017)*, soft hues of the pink of dawn and the reds of dusk, commune with bluish greys of mountains and seas. It narrates a journey from dawn to dusk, at first glance. However, the presence of mystical creatures stencilled in red and blue—into the terrain of the landscape, including serpents, winged creatures like the Chimera, demons, phoenix, monkey gods, and four-legged animals from the forest—indicate a search for the self within dream-like memories. In the centre of the painting, a white-bearded man in a long robe is captured by demon-like creatures (Sheikh, *Across*). One of them resembles Anubis, the Greek God of Death, insinuating death. Four different extracts from poems by Ocean Vuong, Lal Ded, Tahir Ghani and Mahmoud Darwish, on confluences of the self with roads, sky and earth intersperse the stencilled fauna, grey-blue mountains and rivers. Through the selected extracts of poetry and interspersed mythical creatures across world mythologies, Sheikh deconstructs the visual feeling of post-impressionist colours.

In Deeptha Achar's essay on the emergence of the Indian Woman Artist, she mentions that often, "lyricality" was used to denote the "feminine" nature of Sheikh's work. The implication, as explained by Achar, was that the "lyrical" nature of Sheikh's paintings suggested "the sensuous and sinuous" leading to a reductive notion that feminine "affect" dominates over "thought" (Achar 217). While this paper will examine evocative affect and the important relation it has with politics, especially of feminist method in artistic conceptualisation, I shall slightly deviate into Achar's own argument to demonstrate the evocation of the lyrical through intermedial modes. Achar suggests that instead of examining whether the "lyrical is feminine (or feminist)" (Achar 218), there might be an alternative method by which we harness the effect of a term like lyrical and analyse the methods of reading it proposes. She also adds that this might formulate an engagement that allows a feminist dimension to emerge. While Achar herself moves on to connect this analysis to an art historical analysis of Sheikh's work in context with the Indian Women's movement and allied concerns, it is my intent to fully engage with this question. I propose that within the texts I have chosen for this paper, the artists create a lyrical form of engaging with art and text by juxtaposing visual elements that use and are inspired by textual extracts in a corollary to the literary ekphrasis<sup>2</sup>. The brief introductory analysis of Sheikh's paintings, has established that a spectatorial response of her paintings invite poetic readings. It is precisely the nature of flow (produced by her use of colour within the panels) and feeling (encapsulated within the personal and historical narratives of the painting and poetic excerpts) that creates the lyrical in her paintings.

In addition to Sheikh's work through the years, this paper will analyse similar concerns in the work of artist Rajyashri Goody's installation and mixed media practice. Goody, an artist of Dalit heritage, practices a mixed media practice that takes inspiration from seminal texts of Dalit literature. In her work, *Is the Water Chavdar?* Goody uses multiple mediums to engage critical reflections – the installation space is dictated by the narrative of the Mahad Satyagraha. The vast room is axially arranged around a pillar covered with the paper pulp of Manusmriti scripts<sup>3</sup>. The axis of the pillar is inaccessible to the viewer as they are surrounded by 10,000 palm-sized ceramic stupas, signifying the 10,000 undocumented persons of Dalit heritage who accompanied Dr. Ambedkar on the Mahad Satyagraha (Goody, *Is the Water Chavdar?*). The stupas reflect the earthy colours found in Sheikh's paintings. They range from deep browns and reds to watery blues, and light greenish greys. From an aerial view, they form whorls of human resistance against a solitary pillar. Their visual assemblage also evokes the liquid power of rivers of resistance. Thus, they use material symbols of community rebellion to subvert caste power.

Additionally, the walls surrounding the adjacent corners of the room display monotype inkjet prints of the artist, and others beside the Chavdar tank, a Stupa and statues of Ambedkar. The photograph has a quality of water – blotted at the edges, leaking imprints to represent the relationship of Dalit bodies in relation to thirst, access to water and daily resistance. By the right side of the entrance to the installation is a wooden shelf under the inkjet print of a man cupping water in his

palm, turning towards the camera, are the texts with the cover title – *Is the Water, Chavdar?*<sup>4</sup> The booklet contains poems and excerpts from Dalit literature surrounding the need, thirst, taste and fight for water. They are by Vasant Moon, G Kalyan Rao, Namdheo Nimgade, Sharankumar Limbale, Urmila Pawar and Laxman Mane (Goody, *Is the Water Chavdar?*). The text and title critically reflect on the idea of “delicate” or “fragile” and its variant, “delicacy” of water and human thirst. It thwarts an attempt to subjugate a Dalit identity, by inserting texts of resistance, and photographs of a Dalit individual “touching” or “holding” water in his palms. The concept of delicacy is invoked repeatedly within the title that refers to “tasty” in Marathi, and in the literary texts that refer to acts of drinking waters.

Goody’s installation not only opens enquiries to the rhetoric of feeling, but incorporates this rhetoric through the navigation of the space. It works on the principle of denial and reception. As the spectator views each photograph, these stupas dictate the mobility of the spectator around the space. This experience of the installation leads a lyrical feeling of discomfiture. The effect of being hard to reach conveys the accountability one must hold for being part of a caste-entrenched tradition. The hard-to-reach-ness affects the spectator’s experience with the installation – people who were denied water engulf the axis of pulped Manusmriti, while water denied to them distorts the nature of a photograph. For any grounding, there are the small booklets of poems, the only source of written material within the installation (Vats 99).

Goody’s use of literary texts is a common theme employed across other works. In *Eat with Great Delight*, she displays photographs taken on point-click cameras by her family members, in which they are engaged in the act of eating. In this work as well, there are “recipe” booklets containing re-written extracts from famous Dalit literary texts, like *Joothan*, *Akkarmashi* and *The Branded*, etc. In *Ukadala* or *Picnic* the literary extract of Dalit dining experience is accompanied, (like in *Is the Water...*) by ceramic sculptures – but this time modelled in the form of bhakris (millet rotis) and other items which are part of the Dalit food cultures. The installation itself is inspired by extracts from Sharankumar Limbale’s *Akkarmashi* and Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons we Broke*. Goody herself emphasises that the relationship of the Dalit individual to food cultures. She insists that they be consumed along with the textual material (Goody, *Recipes of Resilience*). The textual extracts from literature invoke personal and communal histories, even as they shape the form of installations – whether it be photographs, or ceramic sculptures and paper pulp. This indicates lyrical readings across multiple mediums.

### 1.1.1. Historical experience as formal interventions to intermedial elements of creation

It is worth noting that Sheikh’s mode of intermediality is completely different from Goody’s. Their primary substrates themselves vary – while Goody fashions the ceramics and paper pulp by hand, Sheikh’s substrate is the scroll canvas. Both of them bring in formalistic innovations to their chosen mediums – while Goody’s engagement with pulping the paper, creating a photo exhibition and arranging ceramic sculptures a certain way is symbolic of resistance, Sheikh’s works are symbolic of engagement – the large scroll canvases and their arrangement, invite a commune with histories read by experiencing pain. However, both of them modify space. In Goody’s *Is the Water Chavdar* for instance, there is an unreachability, while in Sheikh’s *Terrain*, the canvases are arranged to form a canopy and mimic the structure of a *shamiyana* – or a makeshift place of shelter.

Consequently, a common aspect to both their works is the engagement with histories. These are formed by personal confluences – Goody largely embodies Dalit subjectivity and works on an aesthetics of re-writing hegemonical archives, whereas Sheikh embodies subjectivity of loss, longing and recovery across political and feminist histories of displacement or violence and documents both real and surreal experiences. This returns us to the affective in their works, which are reflections of personal experiences of historical realities. Within their lyrical modes, it is the element of the personal that drives formalistic recreations of two kinds – trans-medial and pluri-medial. In Sheikh’s

painting and poetic juxtaposition the forms are trans-medial. Whereas in Goody's placement of mixed media (ceramic sculptures, watered photographs, pulped pillar and texts) and literary extracts in space, it is pluri-medial.<sup>5</sup> (Ceciu 553).

However, the literary extracts in the visual space/medium does not solely perform the function of intertextuality or influence as Margarete Landwehr theorises in her paper (Landwehr 8)<sup>6</sup>. Its presence indicates a reading of text within visual space of engagement, not simply as an intertextual citation, but as a relation between different media, and its performance in the largely visual "textures" of installation. These incorporations within the substrate of visibility – whether large scale paintings in Sheikh's practice, or mixed media installations using sculpture and/ photography in Goody's practice is what this paper introduces as *textural aesthetics*. It is this formalistic intermedial invention that has political and historical connotations that I will refer to as "textural" aesthetics, henceforward.

## 1.2. Generative Affect through Lyrical Intermodalities

In the previous section we have seen how lyricality is created through a textural aesthetic that juxtaposes writing and visuals. In this section, textural aesthetic instances and affective implications of the same will be explored through an intermedial analysis which takes into consideration the semiotic, visual and literary nature of these created "text"ures.

In his essay, "What is this thing called Lyric?", Stephen Burt explores multiple definitions and articulations of the "lyric" as form, mode of poetry, and narrative. In each delineation, the relationship of expressing the personal through feelings, stand out within the lyric form (Burt 425). While it is straightforward to examine the meaning of the "lyric" with respect to written forms of art (literature), its use within visual art opens obvious possibilities for intermedial explorations. I would argue here, that the confluence of the personal and of emotional affect, its relation to music is precisely its transferability to painting: in colours, rhythm, tone and affect. In Achar's essay she refers to Sheikh's works as described as being "lyrical" and how it relates to a subversive ideologue of "feminine" paintings. Here, I would attempt to deconstruct the "lyricity" of this "textural aesthetics" and then move to feminist implications.

Consider Sheikh's panel, *Across from the Terrain...* series. The panel is narrating a tale of journeying – perhaps across borders, as seen from the stencilled images of mythological creatures, it appears to be a dream. The curatorial note for the painting series does not indicate the specific story that this panel illustrates. However, there are heavy implications to a Punjabi folktale which evokes an encounter of an old man, with the shapeshifting form of the Lord of Death (Steel 205). The focus of this paper takes one to the interaction between the premise of this story that appears like a dream, and the poetic extracts. All of these poems by Voung, Darwish, Lal Ded and Tahir Ghani invoke images of an endless sky, and the "road (Sheikh, Across)". When the spectator reads them and journeys the cartography that Sheikh has illustrated through mountains and frontier terrains, there is a chilling emotion – one of desperate hope against existential torpor concerning the event of displacement or exile.

In Kumkum Sangari's research on Nilima Sheikh's practice pertaining to narratives of displacement, longing and transcultural divergences, she mentions that the embedding of text within the image can be indicative of "a feminist art practice that uses intertextuality to foreground the dispersal of authorship (Sangari 163)." This argument parallels the theory of performative citations – of repetitive invocations within art, which have gendered and deconstructive connotations as proposed by Susie Tharu on *Notes for Grammar of the Visual Vernacular* (Tharu 14-19). But in this paper, by foregrounding the implications of lyricality, I propose that the element of performative readings / rewritings in textural aesthetics has a specific function invoking affect – and in this, the performative method is not solely deconstructive<sup>7</sup> as much as intentional towards a certain political reading – whether feminist, anti-caste or on the trauma of displacement. And it is precisely the

nature of *textural* aesthetics that makes this possible. Because, it is the examination of the “feeling” or a meditative approach to the evocations behind these politically present experiences that lead them here (Burt 423). While Sangari is right to mention the relation of intertextuality and multiple authorship, the “feminist” art practice is located not within intertextuality, but within intermediality and its implications of affect.

Reading Sheikh’s figuration in *Across* through the literary extracts demonstrates affective evocations. Ocean Young’s poem, in the painting, ends in an absurd reassurance – “the end of the road / is so far ahead / it is already behind”. Darwish and Ghani’s poems indicate listlessness and pain from the lonely migratory journey – “Where should the birds fly after the last sky?” (Darwish, Nilima *Terrain*) and “Better/ that the worlds / turn upside down.” As a final word, Lal Ded’s voice is an echo of loss “breached and bridged / the day faded”. This range of evocations form an overture to the modality that Sheikh employs.

Textural aesthetics therefore use the lyrical mode to generate affect. Reading these works of art using semiotics provide multiple departures. One – the nature of narratives that are interwoven within the visual aesthetic. In Sheikh’s work one observes the use of history – political, literary and folkloric. Second – the reason or nature of questioning that these significations imply. Through the choice of certain poems and visuals, the spectator is invited to read a certain experience of displacement and migratory journeys through their own lens. The artist’s empathetic vision transfers to some of the readable indications. This builds a transactional intermediary relationship between the emotive affect that inspired the creative act, and that which the viewer engages with. In a sense, this then “mediates” affect through bodily interventions.

Let us return to instances of Goody’s *Is the Water Chavdar*, to observe this multimedial intervention invoking a different history – the experience of caste and drinking water. The installation itself pays homage to the Mahad Satyagraha in which tens of thousands of Dalit persons walked with Dr. B R Ambedkar to the Chavdar Tank in Maharashtra to defy the caste-based denial of drinking or collecting water from the pond. In the centre of this installation is an examination of the experience of thirst (Goody, *Is the Water Chavdar?*). In addition is a history that has not documented this experience, specifically those of the people who accompanied Babasaheb. All the poems in the booklet have instances of Dalit persons foraging for water, written in the form of Goody’s recipes. It functions almost as an instruction manual for experiences in asking for water – whether one is thirsty after a meal, bearing the summer heat, or a day’s work of playing drums, or even seeking water between everyday duties such as studying or cooking and cleaning (Goody, *Is the Water Chavdar?*). This is affective because three elements come together here – the bodily experience of thirst, its historical weight of experience from Dalit subjectivity and the emotional responses of being denied water, and relishing one’s thirst. All these “affect” the spectator. Affect thus implies cognition, emotion as well as bodily movement (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 206–07).

In Goody’s photo-prints, the expressions of different groups of people or individuals (including one of Goody herself) is either defiant, or proud and jubilant. The inkjet print – and its formalistic reiteration of wetness and leaking juxtapose the installation space and the poems (Goody, *Is the Water Chavdar?*). Lars Elleström in his work, “Photography and Intermediality”, would classify photography as art in terms of how it looks as opposed to photographs as documentation/ ethnographic in terms of its subject matter (Elleström 166). However, Goody’s formalistic usage of the inkjet prints, at once challenges and combines these operational binary definitions of what a photograph can “mean” (her photographs are both documentary/ethnographic as well as plays with aesthetic form and subjective representation). In the spectatorial engagement, affective and political connotations of “leaking” and “erasure” are dismantled through the Dalit experience with access to water. Inaccessibility is further emphasised by the pillar of pulped Manusmriti. This imprint carries another message – an invitation to Dalit persons to re-write their histories and rights to access and life. Thus, a lyrical mode of enquiry leads to the generation of affect through multiple modes which question and recreate aesthetic forms and their semiotic historical contexts.

### 1.3. Intermedial Interventions for Alternate Histories and Epistemological Ruptures

Several intermediality theories mention on the one hand – a synchronic study of intermedial relations in artworks (Pettersson and Johansson 7) which investigates formalistic and symbolic relations between media in art and / literature. On the other hand, a diachronic departure investigates the history of these modalities and how media maintain or subvert social and cultural systems of power, or alternatively take part in forming “epistemological ruptures”. As seen in Goody and Sheikh’s works, intermediary methods of textural aesthetics use lyric and bodily mediations to engage with political and cultural histories – in assertion or reiteration. This paper veers towards these diachronic pursuits of analysis. In terms of “ruptures” within textural aesthetics – they not only form epistemological pursuits, but also engage with phenomenological experiences through the aspect of “affect” and the questions thereby raised towards these histories of experience. This expands the range of aesthetic rupture to question epistemologies through consciousness of experience – delivered through the cited literature.

Within this context of multiple mediums an interesting phenomenon arises – of tensions between the borders of subject of expression, mediums used and textual material. These tangible borders within the *textures* often contain and present the aforementioned ruptures (Pettersson and Johansson 12). One instance of this direct use of media history and diachronic affect would be Goody’s installation, *Picnic*, which uses ceramic, a medium derived from soil or clay to narrate stories surrounding Dalit food culture and experience. Here the borders are not as layered as in *Is the Water...* It is simply an installation of several icons of food items including bhakkars, puri, laddoos, and grains, made of ceramic laid out in a large circle. Beside this, is an extract from Limbale’s *Akkarmashi* where he shares an experience of going on a school “picnic” or leisure-cum-education trip, and having to spend a meal with fellow classmates and teacher who come from other upper castes/ classes. The extract is presented once more in the recipe-poem format, re-written by Goody to form part of the installation (Goody, *Picnic*). The narrative describes moments of othering felt by the narrator as he is asked to sit under a different tree from the other students, and opens his lunch of “bhakari and chutney”, a more frugal preparation compared to the rich, “fried and tasty” food that the other children bring (Borah). There are also mentions of untouchability in sharing food, and the act of collecting “leftovers”. This latter act is invoked in another writer’s text, and Goody’s own work – pulping Manu to create the laddus mentioned in *Joothan*, by Omprakash Valmiki in his autobiographical novel with the same name (Borah).

The poem’s narrative uses “might” to refer to the possibilities of discrimination which will follow from the encounter. However, this “might” within the context of the artwork is reflective of resistance to these practices of erasure. There is always the spectre of violence within denying. And of obvious erasure – the one who is presented with “leftovers” is considered leftover themselves. But through the piece, there is a negation of this denial. Here, they are brutal reminders of survival – even if on leftovers, or food that does not comply with upper caste cultural hegemony. The arrangement of the ring, and a poem/recipe by the side employ two kinds of invitations simultaneously – one which invites the spectator to an experience of dining; secondly, reminding them of the lived experience of marginalisation through literature (Goody, *Picnic*).

The medium itself is ceramic and has associations with mud/soil – elements that are often used to marginalise the caste experience (Borah). However, here its usage signifies ultimate “resilience” in nature – soil evolves and survives against all odds. This material history becomes a commentary against othering, and serves as an anti-archive in that sense. Further, through the presence of “inedible” ceramic food, the borders of engagement force an element of inaccessibility upon the spectator (Goody, *Picnic*). Ultimately it confronts and reminds the spectator on the cultural hierarchies of caste within acts of eating, sharing food and dining together in the Indian socio-cultural nexus.

In Sheikh’s *My Hometown* the stencilled text in gold, within the middle section of the painting dictates the reading of the figuration. It narrates the gesture of raising one’s arms in surrender within

a strife torn land, in the event of the artist's friend's mother's death and subsequent funeral procession (Sheikh, *My Hometown*). Several symbols echo the emotions of loss, and communal hand holding within political turbulence. In the topmost panel, there are flames in red and black against the silhouette of homes. A subtle gold shade echoes within the stencilled words. In this manner, Sheikh weaves a continuity of narrative across borders between text and visuals. The painting as a whole is a commentary on the personal pains suffered by individuals within strife-torn areas. A metaphor for this loss and longing for peace is personified in the figure on the bottom part of the scroll. It is a re-visitation of the figure of Hanuman, with a rip in his chest (Sheikh, *My Hometown*). This figure, is coloured in green, an androgynous creature, pulling apart their fabric across the chest to reveal cartographic roadmaps among hills and valleys. Two fingers point within this wound in the heart, and the reader cannot miss echoes to the figure of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which reflects also within the tilted head (Sheikh, *My Hometown*).

As in *Across*, Sheikh weaves a world of intertextual and cross-border confluences between creatures of myth, narratives of religious belief, and symbolic echoes of fire, burning and landscapes. The textual material inserts the language of emotion in the most pertinent manner, such that, while the visuals invoke citations from art history and political history, the text creates a point of convergence for the investigation of an event and its related affect – the experience of the artist's friend in his attempt to provide a funeral for his mother within a politically monitored space in Kashmir. This locus points travels across political borders and histories of dissonance to pore over an experience that is human – whether dream, wish, story or painful reality. Most relevantly, this human experience within the textual narrative holds the figurations and builds a narrative across both political and visual borders in between media. *Textural* aesthetics imbues this nature of cross-border interaction and becomes the impetus for both epistemological<sup>8</sup> and phenomenological<sup>9</sup> rupture.

### 1.3.1. Towards an avant-garde art practice

In Geeta Kapur's essay, "Dismantled Norms: Apropos an Indian / Asian Avant-garde", she argues that a decolonised Avant-garde is dissenting, presents a disjuncture, and problematizes the issues of democracy/nation, as well as is naturally radical in subversion (Kapur, *Dismantled Norms* 411). We have seen through the historical situatedness of the select texts, that they engage in radical subversions of social hierarchies through formalistic departures and thereby foreground experiences of rupture. Kapur would explain that a "dismantled" movement within art would destroy and, in that process, recreate art forms (Kapur, *Dismantled Norms* 373). In Goody's pulping of paper, and reiteration of stories of discrimination, she reinvents an art form of resistance and memory. Kapur accordingly proposes that a critical art practice, indicative of an "avant-garde" is possible only through an interrogative mode, which "bends the claim of radicality in favour of reflection through a subverting aesthetic, through formal innovation and a conceptual re-coding of "artistic" materials (Kapur, *Cultural Conjecture* 54)". In Sheikh and Goody's textural aesthetics, we have seen a discourse of reflective interrogations – often of specific emotions within human experience, narrated through a lyrical, intermedial process.

In Kapur's theoretical terms this study can confirm that the selected texts are "Avant-garde". However, an investigation of the basic definition of "avant-garde" reveals its implication as first of its kind, a sort of forefront (or vanguard) in resistance, and movement. This implies that an avant-garde work is not solely reflective as much as "actionable". When Kapur says "conceptual re-coding of artistic materials" it is redundant, because the artist does not in these cases approach the material in order to re-code or reconceptualise them. Rather, it is an internalised narrative of human experience that shapes a certain quality or form inherent in the artistic material (previously unnoticed as dominant ideologies have framed these materials). Additionally, it is through bodily mediated affect that this occurs. In effect, in the lyrical mediations offered by an exploration of affect, the artist confronts and interrogates new modalities. This encounter with textural art, is mediated by two

bodies in communication. Firstly, the interrogation of new modes is mediated by the artist's body during the act of creation. In turn, during the act of reception, they are experienced (beheld and further introspected upon) by the spectator's body. I shall attempt to demonstrate this occurrence through Sheikh's evolving Champa series.

*When Champa Grew Up* and *Re-visiting Champa*, offer two timelines of engagement with violence against women within the Indian socio-cultural context. In her address at the "Cadences of Resistance" panel held at CSMVS, Mumbai, she described an event that led to the creation of Champa – the news of the death of a young woman named Champa, within her neighbourhood, on account of dowry related harassment and violence. She describes that although the social movements were rife with protests against the dowry deaths, as an artist, she felt inadequate to represent this affliction of women from classes and castes not in alignment with her own. However, when the young girl that everyone in the neighbourhood saw growing up, died under the same circumstances, the resulting affliction inspired a rage in the artist, inspiring her to wield the brush and create figurations that go beyond the event of death (Sheikh, *Cadences of Resistance*). Sheikh's panels on the first Champa series contain figurations of her bodily experiences of the innocence growing up, and the pains of leaving one's maternal home, only to face violence and harassment (Sheikh, *When Champa Grew Up*) in her marital home. There are two aspects to note here – one, of personal affect driving a narrative of painting; two – of the continuation of this feminist dialogue two decades since the first series. In both, there are supporting verbal additions. The first used anti-dowry songs of resistance to accompany the painting. In the second, Nilima's words reappear. They are more frugal this time – a single poem accompanies the first panel; thereafter, single words or phrases, sometimes in Hindi script, are hidden within the spectres of Champas after (Sheikh, *Revisiting Champa*).

In one of the panels in *Revisiting Champa* she names the incidents where atrocities (often of rape and caste-based murder) against women have rocked the geopolitics of this modern nation – Hathras, Unnao, Nirbhaya and others. The motifs of burning fires, and shrouded bodies in the colour of diluted blood are reminders of their horror and a larger question of the position and experience of womanhood within a patriarchal and casteist society (Sheikh, *Revisiting Champa*). These borders between visuals or between text, visuals and reality of the spectator are not as sharp as in other series (Sheikh, *Revisiting Champa*). They permeate the feeling of terror and grief within the spectator, as it does in relation to the timelines of the 1970s to the 20s of the new millennia in this "independent" nation. The mode of the *texture* is a vehicle to express this horror and a call for action, in the interrogation of how much we may have grown as a nation in terms of upholding the rights of a woman, inclusive of her different experiences across caste, class and religious or tribal ethnicity.

Just as many of Goody's works implicate the spectator in the practice of caste within the Indian society, Sheikh's Champa series implicate patriarchal elements within society irrespective of gender. Kumkum Sangari's excerpt on patriarchy being a systemic structure that "divide" women within the socio-cultural spaces of interaction is one such indication, that rests beside the *Revisiting Champa* series (Sheikh, *Revisiting Champa*). Sheikh's figuration contains one such textual element embedded within the revisited painting, of the panel in which the new bride finds herself surrounded by in-laws who are party to the dowry-related harassment. The word reads as "*andhesha*" in the Hindi script. Translated it means an evil omen or an indication/ guess that something untoward might occur. To the reader, it is a symbol of scheming as we are aware of the events to follow. Its real importance lies in the fact that a single word ties together several ideas – of patriarchy and its effect on women within the marital social structures, and to the larger commentary on women fighting against these almost invisible schemes.

Besides this, the pale red coloured word *andhesha* is a self-referential textual element – a verbal indicator of the visual indication of evil omen. This implies the visual function (albeit indexical) of the textual element, within the painting<sup>10</sup>. It questions how we read text within pictures – as a visual experience through an interplay of meanings. Even though this implies a deconstructive method, it

is not the interplay of meanings that is of importance. It is the intended relations between word and visuals reasoned by the spectator, that inevitably serve a deconstructive function. In other words, deconstruction or dismantling is a by-product of the process of the affective interrogation on both the part of the artist and the spectator. “Deconstruction” itself is not the intent that produces affect. This line of enquiry centres intermedial engagements and changes the focus involved in deconstructive theories of avant-garde art. This is possible precisely, because we have approached a lyrical and affective enquiry into the study of *textural aesthetics*<sup>11</sup>.

### 1.3.2. A Return to Affect and Feminist Practice

Accordingly, while these tangible borders of intermediary aesthetics and formal re-coding questions the larger issues afflicting the democracy/nation and presents the disjuncture of reality and experience, it does so through the evocation of “affect”, and precisely through an attempt to understand how the spectator (and prior to this, the artists) may feel about these incidents.

Goody’s *Eat With Great Delight*, is a work motivated by her experiences of being from Dalit heritage and celebrating images which relate to rituals of eating. Inspired by the lacunae of visuals that celebrate Dalit bodies and acts of eating, celebration, joy and family, Goody decided to put this exhibition together from personal family photograph archives (Punyashloka 241). The recipe/poem calls people to rituals of enjoying food – be it of leftovers from *barats* (wedding ceremonies), of sleeping with a full belly even if they are cactus pods, enjoying ice-cream and biriyani (shared by an inter-faith lover albeit of upper caste), or even feeding children cornflakes. What these recipes share is the call to celebrate food practices, despite their lack of abundance or inaccessibility. This celebration is inclusive of Dalit food practices – surrounding rituals of *Joothan* or foraging to satisfy hunger, but is in no means limited by these experiences (Goody, *Eat with Great Delight*). Buying “foreign” food like cornflakes, or eating ice-cream, and corresponding photographs of the artist’s mother at her wedding smiling as she holds a glass of orange-coloured Mango juice, as well as photographs of birthday cakes and celebrations, are as Rahee Punyashloka states, a “counter-archive” of Dalit presence in Indian photography. Here, textual references decentre assumptions of Dalit identities to food cultures, that limit them to certain items of food (very often, beef meat), or of experiences of imploration and hunger (Punyashloka 242).

Punyashloka in his essay identifies four ways in which Goody’s work becomes a counter archive – one, it re-writes and inserts itself into a Brahmanical archive and its token representation of the suffering, hungry Dalit; two, it challenges assumptions that the Dalit relation to food is one of penury and lack or even denial; three, it embodies celebratory gestures and emotions by the Dalit identity in relation to food, thereby deconstructing stereotypical and reductive gazes upon the Dalit identity (Punyashloka 244). The very title of the project is derived from Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan* where he mentions, “Eat the “leftovers” or *Joothan* with “relish”” (Valmiki). In essence, Goody’s artistic practice is born of an affective reflection and in its creation, there is the presence of the body in mediation.

If in *Picnic* Goody creates a statement of resistance against experiences of hunger and untouchability, in *Eat With*... she celebrates and expands this archive of alternate history of Dalit food cultures. Photography and recipe booklets have made a return here. In foregrounding pictures sourced from personal photo albums, and accompanying them with recipe/poems from Dalit literature, there is a sharp focus on emotions of joy, comfort with family and community, and moments of celebrations. The photographs range from various commonplace home memories – of her mother laughing, watching over the baby Goody as they sit in the kitchen before freshly cooked meals; of various family members feeding each other cake; of children posing before plucked fruit in the field. Also comparing with extracts such as “watch her swig the tea/ that has touched / your mouth. Pleasure/ might tingle through our body / all day.” We see this intentional engagement with the affect of bodily elation. In this sense, Goody’s work is a corollary to Sheikh’s revisitiation of the *Champa* series. However, in both, it is a pre-occupation of a certain experience or feeling that induces the creative effort.

If textural aesthetic is fulfilling lyrical engagement through the nature of interrogative affect across differences of affective experience, it now becomes a necessary endeavour to examine its political nature in the theoretical sense. As seen from prior analysis, the “interrogative affect” is produced by the meditation of the artist upon an emotion (feeling) inspired by historical events. In Sara Ahmed’s *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, she traces the emergence of the affective turn as a response to feminist approaches to the body and queer approaches to emotion (Ahmed, Afterword: Emotions and their Objects 206). Within our context, it begets a similar question that Ahmed asks in the text – an investigation of “what emotions do? (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 4).” This question, through the textural material implies the bodily mediations involved in its creation and its reception. This confluence of bodily mediations and emotional affect indicates a feminist framework, primarily as Ahmed and others have pointed out – a questioning of the mind-body dualism (Ahmed, Afterword: Emotions and their Objects 206). This is then the response to the initial question we departed from – the extent to which the “lyrical” is considered “feminine” (Achar 217). From the associations that the “lyrical” has to meditative feelings and perception, they are branded “feminine” precisely because under a Cartesian dualist<sup>12</sup> framework, this understanding of “lyrical” cannot reconcile bodily and mental concerns. From the artist’s responses in relation to political histories as a source of inspiration and material, we realise that the lyrical is indeed political, and often covers feminist themes as well. Ahmed provides cues on how bodies are moved by affect and serve a deeply cultural and political function. Considering these affective turns in visual art/ literature “feminine” is reductive in the sense that both these artists, are embarking on a new aesthetic conceptualisation by using literary text as one of the mediums of visual material.

#### 1.4. Conclusions: Departures for Textural Aesthetics and Feminist Ways of Doing

It is important to note that although our question began with the interrogation of whether Nilima’s paintings were “lyrical”, and therefore “feminine”, this study has led to the thesis that the question in itself is wrongly phrased. A more meaningful examination as shown is to observe the nature of “lyrical” through intermediary poetics and its obvious implications of its contextual history within Indian socio-political events. We may conclude here that it is the particular trait of *textural* aesthetics, to incorporate a lyrical form, firstly by the obvious presence of poetic forms that are reflexive and interrogate certain emotions, secondly through the intermedial possibilities between text and visuals – whether in the form of sculpture, photography, painting or its spatial experience. And this as we have seen, form a wide range – experiences of political migration and displacement, of dowry deaths and gender-based violence, of a deeply personal experience of “mourning” and the trauma of war and strife in Nilima’s work. Besides this, there are questions of human relations to water, thirst, cultural food practices, and the larger commentary on anti-caste resistivity and counter-archives within Goody’s works. The major proposal through this paper is that of the nature of *textural* aesthetics as a way of reading literary text as visual material; its lyrical implications and subsequent evocations of affect.

Sara Ahmed’s theories on feminist implications within affective studies furthers the scope of this study. In essence, textural aesthetics, in questioning human experiences of feeling, invite spectators to engage within the same, and create a relational orientation between literary text and visual substrate. Although the works selected for this analysis don’t centre the “feminist” theme in all the pieces, except perhaps Nilima’s *Champa* series and Goody’s *Eat with Great Delight* (which foregrounds the maternal/feminine presence within food cultures); the perspective here is to examine a “feminist” way of “doing” as an artist when using intermedial poetics within textural aesthetics. Its importance lies in the fact that these intermediary modalities of visual art and poetry are evidences of what Ahmed proposes, “emotive affect can “do”, or invite the body into actions, that serve certain intentionality. This opens the forum for questions regarding a feminist way of doing, that centres emotive affect and subsequent bodily mediations. While this exploration finds traces within this paper, it proposes

larger-scale potential for application across a wider range of texts (perhaps even by male artists), the scope of which is beyond the central questions of this paper.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This is where Sheikh chooses to place the bold, stencilled writing in gold, but the use of the literary will be explored in the later section of the paper.

<sup>2</sup> Ekphrasis: word of Greek origin, meaning a detailed literary description of a work of visual art.

<sup>3</sup> This work itself, is a displacement of Goody's larger project *Manu* in which the pulping of this caste-enabling text demonstrates a pulverisation of the old hegemony towards the re-writing of new revolutionary futures.

<sup>4</sup> *Chavdar: tasty, in Marathi*

<sup>5</sup> Ramona L Ceciu delineates different kinds of intermedial poetics in literature and art. She defines "trans-medial" as the "the *transfer* of motifs/story and formal elements from one medium (art) to another" and of "multimedial" or "plurimedial" as "the *combination* of various media" within a work of art.

<sup>6</sup> Although Landwehr recognises the presence of multiple mediums, ultimately, she draws conclusions based on assumptions of texts, their interrelations, drawing from Genette's conception of transtextuality and "hyperesthetics". This is perhaps because she focalises the influence of visual art on literature, and not vice versa (Landwehr 11). While this paper acknowledges the inception of intermediality studies from intertextual theorisations by Kristeva and Bakhtin before her, I would argue that it is the comparative method that allows for these alternate approaches.

<sup>7</sup> When I say, not solely deconstructive, it is a certain idea of "deconstruction" that I question. Often in art and literature, deconstruction is used to question the inherent meaninglessness or excess of meaning present in a traditional or structural arrangement of language, expression or formalistic art. While here, the intention is to unearth the possibilities through a dismantling, when historical intention drives a deconstructive approach, there is another aspect at play. It is no longer solely a tool to unravel the failings of the traditional structures of art and language, precisely because this formalistic structure was invented or established by a hegemonical cultural institution / ideology. And it is precisely because of the "relation" it draws between one media (text) and the other (visual / spatial – photograph, sculpture, painting) and its historical or political intention that the deconstruction or rather, dismantling of form/structure occurs.

<sup>8</sup> Epistemological in terms of the political history, memory and art historical citations inherent in Sheikh's figurations.

<sup>9</sup> Phenomenological in terms of the conscious experience of the painting and its generation of affect within the spectator.

<sup>10</sup> Derived from Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model of the sign: icons, indexes and symbols. Although words are symbolic signs, I refer to them here as indexical precisely because they not only serve a verbal, but also visual function in the painting.

<sup>11</sup> Also, in terms of lyricality, being a "mediation/ meditation" to understand what one "feels", and therefore their exercises in textural poetics uses a form that controls the spectator's engagement – both corporeally and affectively.

<sup>12</sup> Cartesian dualism essentially presupposes the separate functionalities of the entities of mind and the body. An extensive mapping of this dichotomy led towards binary understandings of culture versus nature, and further,

masculine versus feminine and even public versus private. This developed as patriarchal social hegemonies. Butler draws attention to this in *Gender Trouble* (197). Sara Ahmed, points out that these binaries of mind versus body also influence affect theories, in order to conceptualise “affect” solely in terms of the thought or mental domain (208). Within such discourses, the bodily implications of “affect” as a felt experience is ignored or erased. By drawing the affective nature of lyricality, this paper also attempts to address the feminist turn to affect studies.

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