SILENT STORIES IN ART: AN EXTENSION OF ORAL HISTORIES

Dr Vinita Sinha*

Abstract

Silent stories exist in every culture as examples of lives that have been lived and experiences that have been shared. They are a collection of voices that go on to describe the community and the self, even while operating from the periphery. These are tales of the everyday, as well as events of various magnitudes which go on to define not just the artist, but those around them as well.

This paper delves into oral history, with a focus on fabric art, as a repository of the silent experiences of people. It looks at the lived realities of women, who not only subvert the notion of what art can be, but also consistently create and give meaning to it. We go on to look at orality as a medium that is all inclusive and allows for complete self-expression without any restraint. Silent histories of generations are often transmitted through the oral medium and kept alive within the household and beyond. The two examples of fabric art have been chosen here to analyse the role of authority and memory in the reconstruction of personal narratives. The conversation-like consumption and interpretation of art allows the viewer to enter into an intimate dialogue with the artist.

In the end, silent histories are untold stories that will continue to exist. They are subversive voices that offer us a perspective that is both extremely niche and personal, yet communal in the way that they also hold a mirror to the society and environment from which they emerge. By extending silent histories to include oral histories, we enlarge the scope with which silence can be studied outside of the ornate. We recognise the 'little voices' and their ability to tell a story in a compelling tone, thus legitimising their chosen platform of expression.

*Associate Professor, Indraprastha College for Women, University of Delhi Email: vinsinha@gmail.com

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1. Introduction

The written word is a dominant tool to record experiences, impressions, and aspirations of mankind. It circulates amongst the literate and gathers acclaim. However, there do exist simultaneously, scores of silent histories in the voices of the individuals and the community. In fact the exuberant, resilient, and subversive female voices found in narrative traditions in India serve to enrich the oral ethnographic register a great deal.

The power of the paintbrush, skill of embroidered art, and the practice of storytelling that exists through verbally passing on tales from one generation to the next, draw from a cultural reservoir that enables women to speak, overturn, and win bitter battles of life. Such narratives when conserved and collated may even contribute to the formation of new alternative literatures. Many a time, these defeatist reveries or hopeful victories depicted on canvas or cloth seem to demand the attention of researchers to cognize them as relevant oral histories.

We understand that oral literature confers primacy to contextual narratives over canonical ones. In orality, these canonical scaffolds are collapsed for divergent narratives to spill through, unfettered by structures of normative expression and strictures of a specific medium. Storytelling, in this manner, becomes an exercise that transcends the seemingly simple act of narrating and listening, or reading and comprehending. It takes on a dynamic form wherein even something that is drawn, painted, sewn and embroidered, becomes a medium through which a story can be deciphered.

Oral renditions with allegorical references to the experiences of oppression and expulsion have helped unearth silent histories and unravel stories of the forgotten 'little heroes'. The personal yet shared narratives of this tradition help resurrect identities for the speaking voice. The personal stories of trauma that allow each member of the community to reference and negotiate with their own trauma and not look at it as an isolated and isolating experience becomes a site for analysis. Here, women's narratives especially contribute to the formation of a new way of seeing or imagining a landscape that is otherwise narrated or described largely by men. Memory plays a fundamental role in the creation of such art, its interpretation and later, in the procurement of data during the methodology of

research concerning oral history. But memory, in its manifestation of recounting past events, is untenable and enigmatic.

In our obsession with factuality, we perhaps disavow that which cannot be contoured within the semiotics of letters – the eclectic whirlpools of the psychoscape that elude a neat dissection and sterile preservation. It is this non palpable aspect of memory that is sacrificed at the altar of an 'authentic' recollection, or one that can be measured through words that are not moving or rather, fixed on a piece of paper. Can the very understanding of authenticity be revised? What if the quest for authenticity were to be interpretive rather than interrogative? Such an understanding of verisimilitude would perhaps render legitimacy to candid reflections of the personal wherein the oral account would be seen in terms of its contingencies – cultural, temporal, identitarian. The narratives could probably be seen as an imprint of how the political shapes the personal in the chiseling out of the self for these accounts often mimic the ebb and flow of life itself, meandering through digressions yet streamlined enough to capture the minutest of events simultaneously interiorised and interpolated over time.

Emotionally resonant accounts of individual experiences when contextualised thoughtfully helps the onlooker understand how personal experience is something deeply social as well. This becomes important since it secures the silent story and history that is being portrayed through such art.

Clearly, the oral provides a vocabulary for that which cannot be textually articulated or quantified. These are experiences that are derived from spontaneous or integrative forms of expression that do not restrict themselves to any one mode, thus reflecting variegated strands of an individual, or the artist's reality.

Taking a cue from Frisch's idea of 'shared authority', it can be said that in violation of the traditional process of historians excavating mute archives and linguistic documents, oral history is a dialogic process where a two-way and twofold interpretation takes place – between the narrator and the narrated. It is not limited to the speech act; there is no specific reader, as much as there is an active participant in the form of the audience that consumes it. The artist simply puts across their ideas or lived realities, and a whole system of understanding unfolds wherein the audience hopes to untangle the complexities hidden behind a piece or narrativises it according to their own state in life. The ornate may simply remain so, or else it is probed into and sought to be deciphered, with little interference from the artist themselves.

That said, what remains in this extension of silent stories in art into the realm of the oral is the coming in of a deeply personal experience. The idea that a medium, which has limited restrictions in terms of how one tells a story, can go ahead to voice the inner turmoil and tribulations of its creator while still preserving its quality as art may not seem novel. Yet it is so in its subversion of the very notion of storytelling. The fact that access is not limited, and whoever wishes to narrate their thoughts can do so with little restraint imposed on them revolutionises art. These are silent stories that must be recorded because they have existed, and will continue to exist, despite the relatively less amount of recognition that is awarded to them.

2. Fabric Art – Kalavati Devi's Life Story

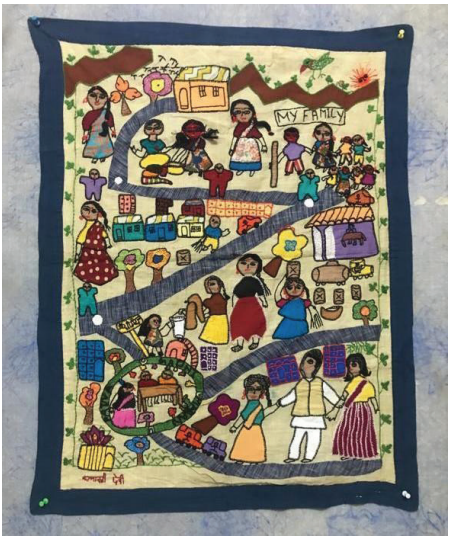

Image courtesy: Kalavati Devi

Personal experience constantly seeps in, regardless of how overt or covert the nature of the art may be. Be it paintings, music, folktales, or fabric; every mode has witnessed a multitude of life stories being presented through them. One such example of fabric art as an extension of a silent story that one can explain to be the story of the greater community is that of Kalavati Devi's life that is depicted in the picture. Born into a community of erstwhile manual scavengers in the state of Bihar, it almost literally paints a picture of the kind of environment that they lived in. The embroidered piece tells the tale of her movement from ignominy to a kind of reckoning. Based

in Mandiri and the R Block areas of Patna[1], her family as pictured consisted of her parents and siblings who were all exposed to abject poverty primarily as a result of their caste occupation. This limited mobility in terms of achieving a better standard of living through the pursuit of different professions. While her father, who is present in different parts of the frame, is shown as a diminutive figure with perhaps little contribution to the household, it is her mother that shoulders the brunt of raising the children as well as making sure that there is food on the table, if any. One may extend this further and say that this is the state of most men of the community who had seminal roles since manual scavenging as an occupation was mostly carried out by women. It was predominantly the women who were condemned to an existence that came with little to no rewards and involved an unrelenting routine of carrying the burden of human excreta on a routine basis.

The children in the frame, Kalavati Devi included, are depicted with blackened faces to symbolize not just the impossibility and desperation of their circumstances, but also the rage that is present within each member of the community owing to this cyclical nature of scarcity and oppression that they must deal with. Here the hope of a better life seems distant. The ability to rise above and find newer avenues for financial independence as well as for an existence that comes with some form of respect and social standing may be considered almost unimaginable. Rage, one can argue then, is the only way to resist. It fuels a kind of hunger to break the shackles of their chained existence and champions a recognition that people do indeed deserve more. This conviction adds to, and in a way counteracts, the factors that negatively reinforce compliance in the minds of the larger community. Later, when young Kalavati visits the Gandhi Maidan[2], a notable event in her life that she specifically depicts in the frame, there is a measurable change in her situation. We begin to understand that there is now in fact some kind of silver lining that she is going to benefit from. While the same idea may seem reductive, one is made aware of the kind of power that is wielded by those placed at the higher rungs of society, who shoulder the responsibility of extending support and aid to the disadvantaged. The event at Gandhi Maidan became a defining moment for Kalavati simply because it marked the successful launch of the first 'Pay and Use' toilet by Late Shri Bindeshwar Pathak[3]. This effectively laid a foundation stone for the steady eradication of manual scavenging as a means of employment. One can then also suppose that this moment perhaps added fuel to the fire in the minds of those like

Kalavati, who were finally shown a way to let go of the kind of life that they were used to up until that point and look towards a better one. It defines a coming into grace, a move away from the humiliation that accompanies not being able to access clean drinking water or water in any form, and of being able to escape the life lived in the slum-like railway colony setting where her and her family had spent their lives.

Finally, Kalavati Devi's winding roads lead us to the last part of the piece which shows a man clad in a white kurta and pajama, with a khadi jacket leading women like Kalavati onto a life that is rid of the pain and suffering that she was thus used to. It was an initiative to recast several women in the social milieu as individuals of merit, and to give them the necessary skills and opportunities to start afresh. This 'mentor' becomes Kalavati's point of entry into recovery from the oblivion that she found herself in. This circular history of no relief and of a daily drudgery that was difficult and dehumanizing, finds an end through this effort to rehabilitate. In a sense, the idea that makes this piece of art even more poetic or meaningful in the way that it tells a silent story is that it is Kalavati's redemption. Her enraged self finds an outlet through this embroidered sujini[4] work that fashions her autobiography into a compelling narrative of her self and the journey she has been on, all while operating from within the realm of art. It is not a direct assertion of her identity as much as it is a fixed yet seemingly soft portrayal of her lived reality as a silent history.

This silent story, embroidered onto fabric, is not just a representation of Kalavati Devi's personal journey but also a broader metaphor for the unseen struggles and triumphs of many women who navigate oppressive social structures. The act of embroidery itself becomes a form of resistance, a quiet yet powerful assertion of identity and agency. Each stitch carries a fragment of memory, a trace of history that might otherwise go unrecorded. By transforming her lived experience into art, Kalavati Devi reclaims the narrative, ensuring that her past is neither forgotten nor dismissed. Her work aligns with a long-standing tradition where craft serves as testimony, allowing those relegated to the margins to etch their stories into the fabric of collective memory.

A hesitation to share and apprehension thus underline efforts towards recording or even creating silent histories. The reason that they remain silent and become 'art' in a form which may even be overlooked in terms of the story that it tells is because of multiple reasons. Literacy, social standing, and access to resources are just the

tip of the iceberg. There will constantly exist a kind of nervousness that is exhibited by 'small' artists when it comes to putting thoughts out into the world. Will they be received well? Will it even garner an audience, or be received? Self-doubt also marks this process. Another factor that defines the silence behind such stories is that there has rarely ever been a means or an avenue that allows for the self-expression of these artists, especially females. This kind of art is either relegated to the sphere of the home and hence becomes personal, and something done in leisure, or it fails to achieve the kind of status that art is capable of by way of being described as rudimentary and less refined. Although the debate surrounding art continues, and one may argue that anything that pleases the eye can count as art, the fact remains that mapping the presence of oral histories in art comes with a gripping need for the researcher or scholar analysing the same to understand that there will be layers that need to be unraveled. Layers of hesitation, layers of fear of sharing something so innate or else so personal to oneself, and layers of subsequent effort that is put in to make something consumable, not just for an audience but for oneself as well. It is a sure process of breaking barriers and subverting the notion that only a certain group of 'skilled' individuals can produce art, that it must be confined to the boundaries of the ornate and ethereal, and that it must not be political in the sense of pointing fingers or voicing injustice.

Memories that are etched in one's mind find a way to make themselves heard through the oral. Dreams that one harbours, thoughts that one thinks, and emotions that one feels; the dynamic and the everyday, all of it compels the artist and provokes them to stitch together a new narrative that defines them. These tales can be as niche or as general. They can hold a mirror to society or be idle musings that find a place and commonality within the larger community or even an individual. There are no bounds, there is no end, and there is no definitive method that constantly imposes itself on the artist. Subversion and overturning of norms, or set ideas is the principal manner in which such art is created and passed down. There is even an overturning of the notion of the artist and who can create. There may even be multiple artists within the same household – a mother who paints on the walls, a grandmother who narrates stories that she heard from her grandmother, and aunts who sing witty folk songs all while going about their routines. Orality tells us that songs are art, wall paintings and embroidery are art, folktales are art, all in their own right as silent representations of generations of women and men who continue to weave new things from the old.

3. Stories of Hope – Veena Upadhyay and the Peepal Leaf

A second piece that brings together the idea of art as it were, is an embroidered peepal leaf on a black painted canvas. If one looks at art also as a spectrum, then the two pieces mentioned here – Kalavati Devi's life story and Manju Devi's peepal leaf find themselves on two ends of the same. Kalavati's autobiographical piece is a story of oppression and redemption. On the other hand, Manju Devi's peepal leaf is her patron Veena Upadhyay's experience and inner turmoil fashioned into a symbol of hope for the onlooker. The story behind this piece is deeply personal and has been beautifully reimagined. While Kalavati Devi's environment acted as a negative stimulant that perhaps pushed her towards creating her embroidered piece and also standing against the kind of poverty and injustice that surrounded them, Veena Upadhyay and Manju Devi's peepal leaf is a story of positive factors reinforcing the idea of hope and faith in an individual. Although the end may be considered somewhat the same in both cases, the journey towards it is in stark contrast thus also explaining to us just how vast the collection of orality can be and the rate at which it grows.

Image courtesy: Veena Upadhyay and Manju Devi

There is a defining moment here as well. Juxtaposed against the socially liberating event at Gandhi Maidan is Veena Upadhyay's journey to Bodh Gaya[5] where she comes in contact with the spiritual and the transcendental. The significance of the peepal leaf is two-fold – primarily, the leaf is considered an auspicious symbol and used in rituals and practices, but more importantly here, the leaf has a personal angle. Upadhyay's visit to Bodh Gaya, a famous Buddhist

pilgrimage site, was foreshadowed by the Covid-19 pandemic which witnessed harrowing accounts of the loss of human life, widespread scarcity, and the overhauling of human emotions to an extreme end. Upadhyay was also a first-hand witness to the rising death toll as a result of her neighbourhood in Delhi being flooded by ambulances and stretchers on a daily basis. Seeing the same through her window every day, there came for Upadhayay, an extended period of dejection, helplessness, and grief, which echoes the experience of most individuals during the global pandemic. This shared misery and despair found some respite and solace through this very leaf.

On passing through one of the sites, the leaf pictured above fell on Veena Upadhyay's head and as she picked it up to examine it, a priest passing by told her to keep it as a blessing. This mirrors multiple cultural practices and beliefs which see the same instance as a symbol, as if there has been some form of divine intervention. The leaf is holy, and the act of it landing on her head is centred on the spiritual idea of the hand of an elder or a well-wisher gently blessing a young one, filling them with hope for all that is to come. One can infer the same solely because the coming together of nature and culture, or nature and religion is integral to most practices that have a cosmic origin or relationship. These themes also find expression in oral literature and art.

The peepal leaf, which has been carefully embroidered in a running stitch pattern in white on a black background, translates the simplicity of the event. It also highlights the solemnity which exists in the story behind its origin, and offers the same comfort and peace to its beholder.

Upadhyay herself describes the incident as sublime because it manifested itself in the form of an epiphany which seemed to tell her that present hardships too shall pass. The human experience which is laden with hopelessness also knows hope, and how to wish for better and to look beyond. On looking at the piece, one is also drawn into the same kind of message. The leaf as a motif has great significance in Indian households. This is owed to not just its ritual uses, but because it is also a tree that is referenced in most stories and marks the central meeting point of the village that is privy to the growth of every individual as well as the community as a whole. It well and truly nurtures all who come in search of shade, and the design here extends almost a kind of mystical as well as mythical effect on the viewer. We recognise the leaf to be identical to the one that we used to draw as children, and in a way, it also captures our journey from childhood to adolescence and adulthood. The deliberate yet

detailed mimicking of the veins of the leaf also brings to life the inanimate leaf and the abstractness of the human experience in a metaphorical sense. The veins are indeed the life force, and the lines which may seem fragile are still resolute and attached to the stem and the body of the leaf much like human beings being anchored to their faith and belief in the face of adversity.

There are many connections that one can make, and the leaf has been conceptualised as such that it takes on another self which is open to its audience's interpretation. There is an obvious beginning and an end that one can find in the image, be it in its shape or in the kind of meaning one tries to find in it. The piece is aesthetically pleasing, and the process of examining it is one that the audience can engage in on their own, thus in a way bringing in their own silent story into perspective and creating a dialogue that is personal to them as well.

Orality then becomes our window into a world of silent stories that are otherwise lost to time and oblivion. It rejects ornamental platforms, mediums, and audiences, and the artist creates because they can. They create to express and to historicise their experiences, which ultimately results in a new collection of stories that must be seen, heard, and read into.

Art, in its essence, is not merely a reflection of the external world but an intimate dialogue with the values that shape human existence. It embodies resilience, compassion, justice, and the unyielding spirit of hope, offering both an archive of collective memories and a beacon for future aspirations. Whether through the strokes of a brush or the stitches on fabric, creative expression becomes a vessel for empathy, understanding, and resistance against oppression. It fosters a sense of belonging, allowing individuals and communities to inscribe their truths into the broader cultural consciousness. Thus, art is not only an aesthetic pursuit but a moral and ethical engagement, continually shaping and reshaping the way we perceive ourselves and the world around us.

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Notes

1. Mandiri and R Block are neighbourhoods in Patna, the capital city of Bihar, India.
2. A historic ground in Patna, Bihar located near the banks of the Ganges which has witnessed the launch of multiple nationalist movements.
3. Founder of Sulabh International, an India based social service organisation.
4. A traditional form of hand embroidery that typically makes use of soft garments that have been handed from generations. It is especially used for newborns, and is a craft mostly practiced by females.
5. A famous Buddhist pilgrimage site, said to be the place where the Buddha attained enlightenment.

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