

## Hybrid Imagery: A Creative Fusion of Tradition and Modernity in 20th Century Indian Art



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### Abstract

*The study focuses on the concept of hybrid images which often synonymize with the terms, composite, syncretic, chimerical, metamorphic, etc. in the Indian paintings considering the post- independence scenario. Composite and hybrid forms hold their roots back to the pre-urban communities; and post-Vedic era when Bhakti cult emerged and resultantly material religious image was created. The above stated research puts forth the claim that composite and hybrid forms in twentieth century possess a symbiosis of indigenous and traditional features of such forms infused with the symbolism and modern visual execution. This research aims at investigating the reappropriated meaning of such forms portrayed in the post- Independence Indian paintings. It further targets to undergo a psychoanalysis of the artists and the audience by studying selected works of the concerned artists. To study the various strategies used by the artists to modernize this concept without stirring the indigeneity and mythological facet. The facts and references provided in the manuscript affirm the stated hypothesis. The modern artists revisualized the traditional iconography of certain popular hybrid and composite forms and they also created several such new forms according to their distinct cognitive approaches. This study contributes in stating the mythological and religious matrix functional behind the concept of hybrid forms. Several Post-Independence artists such as Gogi Saroj Pal, A. Ramachandran, Tyeb Mehta, Manjit Bawa, Shakti Burman, Surendran Nair, Seema Kohli, etc. depicted composite imagery along with other mythological icons to convey their personal dilemmas, social-political commentary, and to re-assess new meanings to such indigenous forms. These composite and chimerical figures act as visual metaphors for several contemporary happenings rather than holding to their mythological meanings.*

**Keywords:** Hybrid forms, Mythology, Tradition, Modernity, 20th Century Indian painting.

### Research Paper

#### Introduction

Hybrid forms, in visual art means when two or multiple forms are morphed to create a new form, popularly known as composite images. In modern and post-modern era, such forms have been interpreted as visual metaphors employed by an artist to impart deeper meaning to his composition apart from the usual appearance of its forms. One may observe distinct personifications of such fusions, most common of which are ptero- morphic forms, anthropomorphic forms, therio-morphic forms, zoomorphic forms etc. In Indian art, composite imagery

can be traced back to the pre-historic times amongst the images incised over the rocks, petroglyphs, seals and painted walls and ceilings of the caves, followed by its appearance in reliefs and sculptures during ancient and early medieval period, in frescoes of Ajanta, in far eastern Indian paintings, later in medieval Indian paintings of deccan regions, also their exposure in the Pahari paintings. Such forms find their maximum appearance in the miniature paintings especially those done in the deccan areas of India. The artists during the colonial era also depicted such forms in some of their works. An

advent of modernism during the early decades of the 20th century witnessed a wave of freshness in the Indian art world. The artists were neither in favour of western academicism nor in the old traditional artistic notions. This non-western modernisation paved a pathway of total conceptual renewal, ideological freedom, personal expression. It was during this period when they re-invented the meaning of established iconographies and visual vocabulary.

The hybrid forms which found their expression in earlier artforms, usually based on religious mythological tales, folklores and fables, were re-formed in their composition and were equipped with new interpretations to express certain metaphors. This study contributes to highlight the modifications adopted by the 20th artists in the portrayal of such forms. The present paper also aims at evaluating the claim that the composite imagery depicted in twentieth century reflects the traditional and modern ideologies at the same time. The concerned study further supports the fact how art, artist, religion, society and tradition co-exist in a close-knitted mesh.

### Historical Perspective

Composite forms may also be synonymized as hybrid, metamorphic or syncretic forms. Hybrid forms are non-existent in reality, but their occurrence is observed universally in the art world. Through the term 'hybrid or composite form, the artist intentionally or unintentionally puts forward the concepts of fantastic, strange, demonic, supernatural, plurality of character, distorted or unfamiliar shapes and forms. There is not a definite way to interpret the synthetic nature of hybrid forms. The artists have used diverse ways to depict their composite character. Such forms possess their unique iconography usually based on religious and mythological subjects. These can be majorly categorized as Anthropomorphic forms (one that resembles human beings in appearance and behaviour), therio-morphic (animal headed human body), ptero-morphic (winged- animal or human), part human and part bird, zoomorphic (fusion of multiple animals), Animals inside animal form (pashukunjar), female figures inside animal's body (narikunjar). Apart from these, Multiplicity of limbs is yet another form of hybridity observed in ancient and medieval art forms which depicts plurality and the super-natural character of the beings.

'The animals being a major source of living since the prehistoric times, also had a divine association. Many tribes and races had their own mystic animal, half worshipped as a god, half suspected of being an

ancestor' (Nivedita, 1997). In search for hybrid beings during that era, one comes across images representing animal-headed humans or a crown depicting an animal head, zoomorphic images etc. Apart from this, it also suggested that a human body with an animal head represented shamans, who were believed to inhabit an animal body in a state of trance. It has been proposed that the composite images seen in deep trance were later painted as if projected onto the cave wall in a manner equivalent to the projection of entopic images and that altered state of consciousness was the link between the evolution of higher states of consciousness and the origin of art. Apart from this, the part-human and part-animal form (horned figure or wearing a horned-headress) suggests the adoption of some of the beast's traits. This custom may find its link with ancient Mesopotamia where a horned headress of the ruler was believed to impart power or divinity to him. This icon also usually interprets the figure as a prototype of Hindu god, Shiva. Another example of the dominion of religion can be asserted through a seal from Mohenjodaro (ca. 2100- 1750) showing interlinked tigers which actually represent a direction like a Swastika (Huntington, 23). 'It can also be

stated that the harappan people were concerned with ideas that go beyond everyday experience' (Huntington, 1985, 24). They depicted deeper sides of a personality through hybrid forms.

Religion and myth (religious or non-religious), two of the most impactful factors, became the stemming sources of composite imagery in Indian art history. The concept of hybrid forms got solidarity through prevalent myths in Indian society, which was later visualized through narratives in rock art, murals, sculptures, frescoes and paintings. Literary evidence suggests the existence of distortion, hybridity and exaggeration in forms representing the divine, supernatural or sometimes even beastly characteristics. Interspersed traits of various beings are portrayed into a single form, thus marking its hybridity.

It has also been stated that, 'Hinduism was a linguistic and cultural combination of Vedic words and Indus images, as well as contributions from other cultures. In some areas this combination was a fusion, a melting pot, a hybrid, whereas in other, the elements kept their original shape and behaved more like a tossed salad, a multiplicity' (Donger, 77).

The art of ancient India also relied mostly on mythological subjects. The reliefs and sculptures of

ancient era displayed hybrid forms either through the expression of mythical creatures or through the multiplicity convention of religious form. 'The supreme forms of deities have been shown conceptually and iconographically composite in nature' (Bhattacharya, 48). The duality or multiplicity of their limbs suggested the plurality of their personality, moreover the intensity of their physical and spiritual potential. 'In Indian art, the composite character of the image- it being a synthesis of a form (rupa) and no form (arupa)- is often visually represented through multiple physical properties of the form or by expressing it as an aggregate of no. of forms drawn from nature' (Bhattacharya, 1). Prominent examples include iconic forms such as 'Hara Hari', 'Ardhanariswara', 'Nataraja', 'Trimurti', 'multi- armed goddess Durga', 'Ten- headed Ravana' etc. in Indian reliefs and sculptures. Besides these, the portrayal of semi-divine beings like yaksha, yakshi, gandharva, kinnara, kimpurusa, vidyadharas, vahana of hindu deities, also come under this category. Early historic era supports the presence of such forms through the depiction of mythical beings of jalacharin (aquatic) category on the painted ceilings of Ajanta; later in the carvings at Sanchi, Bharhut and Amravati.

The early medieval era experienced the development of three major religious cults- Shiva, Vishnu, and Devi. Hybridity or metamorphosis is noticed in the form of composite portrayal of several deities. The duality of male and female consort in Ardhanareswara; conjoining two or more deities such as Hari-hara, Trimurti; and the various incarnated forms of Vishnu express hybridity of religious images. The Buddhist and Islamic paintings of medieval India reflect metamorphic forms such as angels (winged humans) and composite animals in the form of pashukunjar, narikunjar, and buraq. Angels were believed to be celestial beings that usually represented the paradisiacal setting where the ruler dwells. 'The composite animal illustrations depicted in miniature paintings, acquired through Persian manuscripts have their roots back to early Buddhist manuscripts in Central Asia' (Ghosh, 2021). The figuration of giants, demons and mythical creatures offer a fine blend of naturalism and fantasy. These are basically categorized as aerial mythical animals (Vyomacarin), terrestrial mythical animals (Bhucarin) and aquatic mythical animals (Jalacarin), but one comes across distinct variety of combinations, in which different creatures have been hybridized to create a new being, which the artist aims to put on the surface to fulfil the conceptual and aesthetic requirements of the composition. These forms also

found their portrayal in the later stages of Indian art but with a reinvented form and meaning. The modern Indian artists reinterpreted the conception of hybrid forms and therefore, the iconography and meaning of such forms faced a thorough drift during the previous century.

### Wave of Modernism

The year 1947 brought a sudden wave of noticeable social, economic, political and cultural changes that affected the artistic landscape of India as well. The early 20th century paintings were influenced by nationalist movement and hence displayed more, the traditional or Indian themes. The artworks had their subjects rooted in the Indian mythology and literature. An extract from the book, *Memory, Metaphor and Mutations: Contemporary Art of India and Pakistan* by Yashodhara Dalmia and Salima Hashmi says, 'The growing need of the nationalist struggle, along with a greater demand for indigenization, led Abanindranath Tagore to revive traditional aesthetics- particularly in the miniature form, and use them to express his painterly vision' ([https://www.india-seminar.com/2007/578/578\\_yashodhara\\_dalmia.htm](https://www.india-seminar.com/2007/578/578_yashodhara_dalmia.htm)). In the forties of 20th century, the artists felt a strong urge to re- invent the meaning of art. They aimed at infusing the Indian art with a fresh and modern approach. These artists opposed the western academicism imposed by the colonial rulers and the established traditional customs of Indian art. Instead of portraying popular mythological subjects, the artists put into frame their surrounding life and contemporary themes of their society. They invested in the fact that rather than being a mere decorative piece, art was needed to have contextual relevance. The forces of history and threat to humanity made artists remodel the human form in its truncated, distorted and twisted anatomies (Dalmia, Hashmi, 17). The modernists painted traditional subjects from mythological tales, legends, and folklores to personify the metaphors of their contemporary social and political world. Post- Independence artists adopted certain traditional icons and re- invented their meanings to fulfil their motive. Thus, the composite imagery also got a modern and evolved version during the 20th century.

### Inter-Relation of Tradition and Modernity

The term 'tradition' doesn't confine itself to mean the religious and ritualistic culture of a nation. In fact, it has multitude of perspectives assimilated in it. Elements such as socio- cultural matrix, political and economic status of a region, indigenous art practices, religion, are



all interlinked to reach the tradition of a place. In the context of art, tradition means the long- practised art ways, iconographies, methods, ideologies, and visual vocabulary. 'Tradition is a flexible element that needs its ideas and practices to be constantly re- invented to suit present purpose. In the development of non-Western modernisms, such as that of India, visual traditions have collided with external elements, such as those from Europe. Indian modernist artists have moved to assimilate the traditional and the modern, reinventing both in a twentieth century Indian context' (Kumar, 1999). 'The modern and contemporary artists of 20th century have integrated the modern, classic and popular visual cultures to visualize certain metaphors, thus preserving the traditional art of India by modernizing it' (Bonnett, 2005). The modernization of tradition helped the Indian artist to create a universal and global visual language, thus strengthening the relation of art and society.

### **Re-assessing the hybrid forms in 20th century Indian art**

The work of modern and post- modern artists reflects the impact of changes in the cultural and artistic landscape due to changing social, economic and technological scenarios. It highlights the relation between form and time, fusion and unraveling, and the constant negotiations across a broad range of cultures and time spans. They are the representations of the local, trans- local, cultural and historical impact on the other. Hybrid forms in the paintings of twentieth century artists are the reflections of long- term continuities as the modern artist created an amalgamation of traditional artistic modes and his modern and innovative ideas suggestive of an art language that could connect the contemporary situation of the nation with its people.

The artists exhibited hybridity in forms which possessed multi- dimensions in combination, styles, contextual studies, strong historical and cultural impacts, reflected in the paintings. 'The modern artists expressed their concern for the ordinary and everyday through the prism of history, legend and myth, thus linking the present with the past' (Grewal, pp.36-43). In traditional art, there is no space for an artist's personal expression, whereas the contemporary artists portray their personal and contemporary art. The modern Indian artists understood the significance of what's traditional. It has a symbolism and a deeper meaning, therefore they rooted their modern ideas of composite imagery in popular traditional art of India.

One of the important underlying reasons for the emergence of composite forms in Indian art has been the dominance of religion over the Indian society, which continued to lay its signifying impact earlier through miniatures, followed by a global language of the modernists in 20th century. The present study mentioning the modern hybrid images will bridge up the gap between the concept of such pictorial devices portrayed in the early centuries with those portrayed in the 20th century artworks. The artist felt the need to solidify this construct based on certain myths in order to personify his conceptual frames. The art of Ancient India witnesses majorly religious ideas and the concept of material religious image, thus, holds considerable significance in the derivation of these syncretic forms in modern Indian art. Sources available to explore these concepts during that time are scant and mainly literary and epigraphic (Gerard, 529). One finds mention in the Ancient Vedic literature regarding the depiction of gods and goddesses as possessing bodies, particularly in the Rgvedasamhita which also succeeds in explaining the composite nature possessed by the deities. The people in Ancient Vedic era, relied more on language than on material image. The period from the 4th to the 2nd century BCE introduced material religious iconology in various circles of the Vedic society. Yaska's Nirukta discusses the anthropomorphic character of gods, and the Svetasvataraopanishad discusses the divine body and its representation and interestingly uses the term Pratima in this context. (Gerard, 530). Many Indian artists, especially during the last century have included Hindu iconography in their works and modernized them in order to impart the desired meaning to their concepts. Apart from the simple, idealized and abstract images, a multitude of anthropomorphic, theriomorphic images of deities and super- human beings that, in all their complex, rich, and meaningful variety, dominate the study of Hindu Iconography (Gerard, 540).

Post-Independence Indian paintings have noticeable depiction of metamorphic forms equipped with varying under- laid themes. Apart from acting as a religious icon, composite figures took the shape of other visual metaphors during 20th century. The famous artists, Professor K.G. Subramanyan drew on folklore, myth, and fable to comment on political and social circumstances. His works carry a political charge, they are equipped with the language of allegory and satire and still carried with playfulness, spontaneity, humor, and even eroticism. The artists adopted multiplicity in iconic forms to suggest their plural character. His human

figures with wings work out for a dream- like sequence to his compositions. In the painting 'Fleeing Angels', a quadruped having horned- human torso is also noticed which is also observed in earlier Indian sculptures (figure 1). Manjit Bawa executed the mythological subjects with an unusual version. He re- invented the concept of multiplicity in his compositional setting. He also developed certain icons. To further assert the statement, one may observe his painting in which Bawa has painted the iconic figure of goddess Durga seated over a dual- headed lion rather than a normal lion, which suggests hybridity. (figure 2).



Figure 1



Figure 2

During Post-modern era, the Indian psyche united the spiritual and the sensual, the beautiful and the grotesque, the simple and the complex, the chaste and the ornate. It was full of contrasts, always painting opposites. It is as if were based on the duality of life itself, the evil and the holy. The devil and devata co- exist together. The myths appealed so much to the artists that in the delineation they could effortlessly combine the animal head with the human body, they could make the figure multi-armed or multi- headed. Make them dance or make war, without any congruity (Primoo, 95). A few artists have made use of composite imagery in their paintings to

visualize their childhood memories. The work of such artists thus possesses a dream- like sequence. For this personification, they presented the traditional subjects of Hindu mythology, folk art and literature. Artists such as Anjali Ela Menon, Shakti Burman, Madhvi Parekh painted winged forms, anthropomorphic forms, iconic forms of Hindu deities, therio- morphic forms etc. Madhvi Parekh's paintings rely on a child's fanciful logic of representation. Therefore, one can notice simplified hybrid forms in her compositions which relate to the folk tales or fables. She has also depicted her ideas through the form of Durga. Down in this list, are contemporary artists like Rini Dhoomal and Seema Kohli who used mythological motifs to highlight female elegance. She has painted winged elephant in her works which reminds us of the Airavata of Hindu god, Indra and also reminds of the elephant in Buddhist mythology. The flying elephant motif is also sculpted in Amravati, Sanchi and Nagarjunakonda. Rini Dhoomal depicts anthropomorphic and winged forms in her work.



Figure 3



Figure 4

Another artist who has made a considerable effort towards upgrading the hybridity in Indian art is, Achutan Nair Ramachandran. In 70's, his works collided the mythological concepts with the political chaos of the country at that time. He believed that one could create



his own myth which could assign distinct meaning to forms. In 'Kali Puja', painted in the wake of Naxalite violence, the artist alludes to the manipulation of young men and women by greedy politicians (Jhaveri, 2005). In 'Nuclear Raginis' (1975), which is a series in response to the nuclear explosions at Pokhran, he adapts traditional Ragamala paintings, replacing princesses with peasant women (figure 5). The iconic camel is composed of naked headless- human figures in such a way that they fit the anatomical composition of the animal. The artist further reforms the mythological compositions by modifying the established iconography, for example, like Vishnu, the artists appears to be seated on a serpent but holds different attributes like paintbrush (figure 6). A seated figure of kinnari is painted on the left; and a goat with a frontally- placed female head rests on the right.

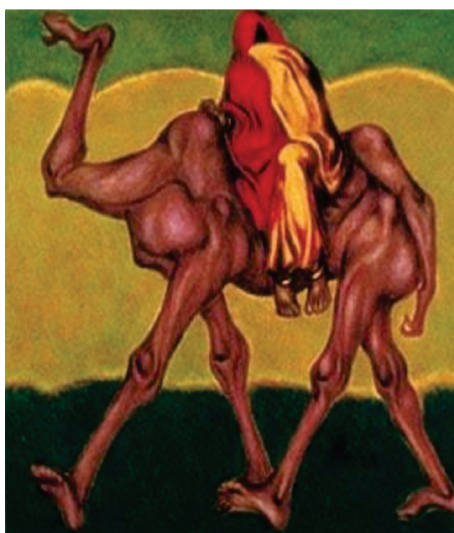


Figure 5

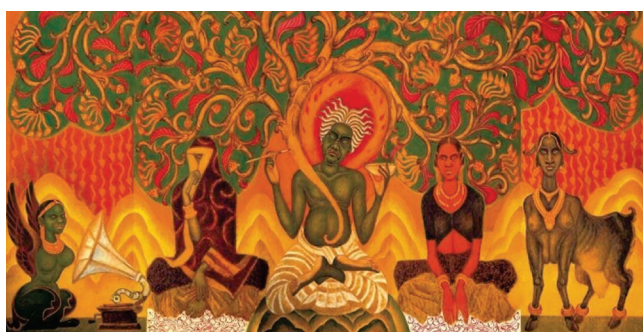


Figure 6

Ganesh Pyne also draws his themes from medieval literature, Puranic mythology and Bengali folklore and recreates his own visual language. The representation of the caged bird is one of the favourite metaphors in the songs of Bauls, the mystics of Bengal, revived again in the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore (Sen, 1999). The

half-bird and half-man evokes the mythical kinnaras. Gogi Saroj Pal has painted the traditional iconic Kinnari to express her situation of despair after she suffered an accident. She has created a new iconography and creative visual symbols that bridge the gap in continuity of our cultural identity. Her bird- woman is unlike the kinnara- kinnari seen at Bharhut or Ajanta, and her horse- woman is dissimilar to the Ashvumukhi figures at Samchi (Pal, 2011). The winged Kinnari form suggests her wish to be free despite her disability. In contemporary era, Surendran Nair draws his inspiration from Indian and Greek mythologies and his paintings are, in turn, mischievous, ironic and quizzical as they infuse a gentle surrealism into prevailing notions of reality (SAFFRONART). His hybrid forms reflect a mixture of Greek and Indian iconic forms. Related works include 'Alibis of the Cognates- III' (2015), 'labyrinth of Brahma's Solitude' (1998) etc.

## Conclusion

The modernists of 20th century Indian art related art history, notions of tradition and identity with modernity, of visual language, politics, religious and other faiths, and their ideologies to renew the old iconographies and remodelled the Indian form to personify the underlying meaning in their works.

Simultaneously, they developed their own visual vocabulary of hybrid images in Indian painting. The Modern Indian artist has upgraded the status of Composite forms from a mere source of mythology to a reflective visual metaphor that has helped the spectators to indulge in a universal global language thus created. The above study also offers a quick run through to observe the cultural continuities through the hybrid forms presented in the previous century art. Unlike other compositional elements, hybrid imagery in Indian painting offers a close encounter with the past and the contemporary, simultaneously.

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### Image Details

1. Figure 1: Fleeing Angels, painted in watercolor and oil on paper, by K.G. Subramanyan, 1981. Collection- E. Alkazi, from the book, K.G. Subramanyan: A Retrospective. National Gallery of Modern Art. New Delhi. 2003
2. Figure 2: Goddess Kali on a dual-headed lion, by Manjit Bawa, from [https://www.google.com/search?q=Manjit+Bawa+paintings&sxsrf=APq-WBsi4BmYVFF8YX1ZdDghl6ROYpa9ng:1649070758591&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjCzJmmo\\_r2AhUTSWwGHYC0AUgQ\\_AUoAXoECAIQAw&biw=1517&bih=730&dpr=0.9#imgcr=O5UtwmRDmVb6QM](https://www.google.com/search?q=Manjit+Bawa+paintings&sxsrf=APq-WBsi4BmYVFF8YX1ZdDghl6ROYpa9ng:1649070758591&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjCzJmmo_r2AhUTSWwGHYC0AUgQ_AUoAXoECAIQAw&biw=1517&bih=730&dpr=0.9#imgcr=O5UtwmRDmVb6QM)
3. Figure 3: Kalia Daman, by Madhvi Parekh, from <https://www.indiaart.com/Art-Marketplace/painting-details/3351/kalia-daman>
4. Figure 4: Messenger, by Shakti Burman, from <http://sandbox.lassiwithlavina.com/sakti-burmans-beautiful-world/>
5. Figure 5: Nuclear Ragini-V (Camel), painted in oil on canvas, by A. Ramachandran, 1975, from <https://www.artoframachandran.com/1991-00.html>
6. Figure 6: Iconic Self Portrait with Umbilical Mahua Tree, oil on canvas, by A. Ramachandran, 1994, from <https://www.artoframachandran.com/1991-00.html>