

Feminist Reinterpretation of Cultural Practices of Mithila

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Abstract— This paper examines the cultural practices of Mithila through a feminist perspective, highlighting the role of women as active agents in the preservation, reinterpretation, and transformation of regional traditions. Traditional historiography has often portrayed Mithila's cultural heritage through patriarchal narratives that marginalize women's contributions and confine them to passive roles within domestic and ritualistic spaces. By drawing upon feminist theory, cultural history, and anthropological approaches, the study critically analyses how gender, caste, and social structures shape women's experiences within Mithila's cultural framework. The paper explores women's participation in rituals, oral traditions, folk songs, and Madhubani painting, demonstrating that these practices function not only as mechanisms of cultural continuity but also as mediums of expression, negotiation, and subtle resistance. Special attention is given to Madhubani art as a feminist cultural expression through which women articulate identity, autonomy, and social critique. The study further investigates the transformation of women's identities in contemporary Mithila, emphasizing the impact of education, economic participation, and cultural engagement in redefining traditional gender roles. While acknowledging women's agency, the paper also critically evaluates the continuing influence of patriarchal, caste-based, and class-based inequalities that limit equal access to empowerment. Ultimately, the paper argues that Mithila's cultural practices are dynamic and contested spaces where tradition and modernity coexist, enabling women to simultaneously preserve heritage and reshape cultural meanings in evolving social contexts.

Key Words— *Feminism; Mithila Culture; Madhubani Painting; Women's Agency; Cultural Practices; Gender Studies; Patriarchy; Folk Traditions; Cultural Heritage; Feminist Historiography; Identity Transformation; Oral Traditions.*

The cultural region of Mithila, located in present-day Bihar and parts of Nepal, has long been recognized for its rich and distinctive traditions, encompassing ritual practices, folk art, oral literature, and social customs. Historically, the study of Mithila's cultural heritage has been dominated by descriptive and often patriarchal narratives that foreground institutions, religious practices, and male intellectual contributions, while relegating women's roles to the margins². Such approaches tend to portray women primarily as passive bearers of tradition rather than as active agents shaping, negotiating, and transforming cultural practices. A feminist introduction to Mithila's cultural history requires a shift in perspective—from viewing culture as a static inheritance to understanding it as a dynamic process continuously produced through lived experiences. Feminist historiography and cultural studies emphasize that culture is not gender-neutral; rather, it is deeply embedded with power relations that define and regulate gender roles.³ In Mithila, these dynamics are particularly visible in everyday practices such as marriage rituals, kinship systems, religious observances, and artistic expressions. While these practices often reinforce patriarchal norms—such as the idealization of female sacrifice, obedience, and domesticity—they simultaneously provide spaces for women's participation, creativity, and subtle forms of resistance. Women in Mithila occupy a paradoxical position. On one hand, they are subject to social constraints imposed by caste hierarchies, kinship structures, and gendered expectations. On the other hand, they serve as the primary custodians of cultural continuity.⁴ Through activities such as the creation of Madhubani paintings, the performance of folk songs, and the observance of ritual practices, women actively sustain and transmit cultural knowledge across generations. These practices are not merely acts of preservation; they are also acts of interpretation, where women imbue traditions with personal meanings, emotions, and experiences. A feminist reinterpretation of Mithila's cultural practices, therefore, seeks to uncover these layered realities. It challenges the binary understanding of tradition as either oppressive or empowering and instead highlights the coexistence of both elements. For instance, marriage rituals in

Mithila may reinforce gender hierarchies, yet the accompanying songs and performances often articulate women's voices, expressing longing, resistance, and critique of patriarchal norms. Similarly, while domestic spaces are traditionally associated with women's confinement, they also function as sites of creativity where women produce art, narratives, and cultural expressions that transcend these limitations. This study adopts an interdisciplinary approach, drawing from cultural history, gender studies, and anthropology to analyse Mithila's cultural practices through a feminist lens.

A feminist cultural analysis of Mithila's traditions requires moving beyond descriptive accounts of customs toward a critical interrogation of the power relations embedded within them. Culture, in this framework, is not treated as a neutral or homogenous entity; rather, it is understood as a site where meanings are produced, contested and negotiated through gendered experiences. Feminist theory provides the conceptual tools to uncover how cultural practices both sustain and subvert patriarchal structures.⁵ At the core of feminist cultural analysis lies the recognition that gender is socially constructed and historically contingent. Drawing on the work of scholars such as Judith Butler, gender is viewed not as a fixed identity but as a performative process—continuously enacted through repeated cultural practices. In the context of Mithila, rituals, dress codes, songs, and artistic expressions function as performative acts that reinforce normative femininity.⁶ However, these same practices also allow for reinterpretation, enabling women to subtly challenge prescribed roles. Another crucial dimension of this framework is the intersection of gender with other axes of power, particularly caste and class. Feminist scholars like Uma Chakravarti have demonstrated how gender relations in South Asia cannot be understood in isolation from caste hierarchies.⁷ In Mithila, cultural practices are deeply intertwined with caste-based norms, which regulate women's mobility, marriage, and participation in public life. A feminist cultural analysis, therefore, pays attention to these intersecting structures, revealing how different groups of women experience culture in diverse ways.

The concept of agency within constraints is central to this study. Contrary to earlier assumptions that portray women as passive victims of tradition, contemporary feminist scholarship emphasizes women's capacity to act, negotiate, and resist within limiting structures. For instance, the creation of Madhubani Painting can be interpreted not only as a ritual obligation but also as a form of self-expression and economic participation. Women artists often embed personal narratives and social commentaries within their work, thereby transforming a traditional practice into a medium of voice and visibility. Feminist cultural analysis also engages with the

idea of symbolic resistance where subtle forms of dissent expressed through cultural practices rather than overt political action. Anthropological perspectives suggest that everyday acts, such as the singing of folk songs during marriage ceremonies or the depiction of non-traditional themes in paintings, can function as critiques of dominant norms. These forms of resistance are particularly significant in societies of Mithila, where direct confrontation with patriarchal authority may be socially constrained. These frameworks challenge the public-private dichotomy that has historically devalued women's contributions. Traditional historiography often privileges the public sphere like politics, institutions, and formal knowledge, while relegating domestic spaces to the realm of the insignificant. Feminist analysis reclaims the domestic as a crucial site of cultural production. In Mithila, the household becomes a center of artistic creation, ritual performance and knowledge transmission, thereby redefining the boundaries of what constitutes "history" and "culture."

Women as Custodians of Cultural Practices

In the cultural landscape of Mithila, women play a central role as custodians and transmitters of tradition, ensuring the continuity of cultural practices across generations.⁸ Their contributions, though often situated within the domestic sphere, are fundamental to the preservation of rituals, art forms, and oral traditions that define the region's identity.⁹ Feminist scholarship emphasizes that such roles should not be dismissed as merely traditional obligations but recognized as active participation in cultural production.¹⁰ One of the most significant domains of women's cultural custodianship is the creation of Madhubani Painting, which has historically been practiced by women on the walls and floors of their homes during religious and social ceremonies.¹¹ This art form serves not only as a decorative practice but also as a medium through which women express collective memory, *Dharmik* beliefs, and personal experiences.¹² Through the transmission of artistic techniques and symbolic knowledge from mother to daughter, women sustain an intergenerational cultural legacy.¹³ Similarly, women play a crucial role in maintaining oral traditions such as folk songs and ritual narratives. Songs performed during occasions like childbirth, marriage, and festivals encapsulate emotional, social, and cultural dimensions of women's lives.¹⁴ These oral expressions often provide insight into women's perspectives, articulating both conformity to and critique of patriarchal norms. Moreover, women's participation in ritual practices ranging from daily *Kuldevi/Kuldevta* Worship (*gosauni Puja*) to elaborate ceremonies, reinforces their position as key agents in cultural continuity. While these roles are embedded within patriarchal structures, they also offer spaces for agency, where women interpret and adapt traditions according to changing social contexts. Thus, viewing women as custodians of Mithila's cultural practices

highlights their dual role as preservers and interpreters of tradition. A feminist perspective reveals that their contributions are not passive but dynamic, shaping the evolution of cultural identity in the region.

Madhubani Art as Feminist Expression

Madhubani Painting, traditionally practiced by women within the domestic sphere of Mithila, has evolved into a powerful medium of feminist expression that reflects both cultural continuity and resistance. While rooted in ritualistic and religious contexts, the art form enables women to articulate their lived experiences, emotions, and social realities through symbolic representation. Contemporary themes in Madhubani paintings increasingly address issues such as gender inequality, environmental concerns, and women's autonomy, thereby transforming a traditional practice into a platform for voice and visibility. From a feminist perspective, this artistic tradition challenges the notion of women as passive bearers of culture and instead positions them as active creators who reinterpret and reshape cultural narratives powers and marginalizes women artists.

Transformation of Women's Identity

The transformation of women's identity in Mithila reflects a gradual yet significant shift from traditionally confined roles toward greater autonomy and self-expression. Modern Mithila women are redefining their identities through education, artistic engagement, and active social participation, thereby challenging long-standing patriarchal norms.¹⁵ Increased access to education has enabled women to question traditional expectations and assert their presence in public and intellectual spheres. Simultaneously, engagement with cultural practices such as Madhubani Painting has provided avenues for economic independence and creative expression, allowing women to reshape their roles within both family and society.¹⁶ Furthermore, participation in social and cultural institutions has strengthened women's collective identity and agency, fostering a transition from passive cultural bearers to active agents of change. This transformation illustrates how tradition and modernity intersect, enabling Mithila women to negotiate new identities while remaining rooted in their cultural heritage.

A feminist reinterpretation of Mithila's cultural practices reveals a complex interplay between continuity and change, where tradition operates both as a mechanism of control and as a resource for empowerment. While cultural norms such as marriage rituals, kinship structures, and gendered division of labor reinforce patriarchal hierarchies, they do not render women entirely passive. Instead, women actively negotiate these structures, exercising agency within constraints and reshaping cultural meanings through everyday practices.

However, this reinterpretation must be approached with caution. The celebration of women's agency should not obscure the persistent inequalities embedded in Mithila's social structure, particularly those shaped by caste and class. Access to education, economic opportunities, and platforms like Madhubani Painting remains uneven, often privileging certain groups of women over others. Furthermore, the commercialization of cultural practices, while offering economic empowerment, risks commodifying tradition and diluting its cultural significance. Another limitation lies in the romanticization of resistance. Not all cultural expressions can be interpreted as acts of defiance; many continue to reinforce dominant norms and expectations. Therefore, a critical feminist analysis must balance recognition of women's agency with an acknowledgment of structural constraints, avoiding both victimhood narratives and overstatements of empowerment. Ultimately, the critical evaluation underscores that Mithila's cultural practices are dynamic and contested, shaped by ongoing negotiations between tradition and modernity, power and resistance. Mithila's cultural practices, when reinterpreted through a feminist lens, emerge as sites of both continuity and transformation, where women navigate, negotiate, and redefine their roles in an evolving socio-cultural landscape.

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