

Representing the Body

gender issues in Indian art

edited by

VIDYA DEHEJIA



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Das describes the sakhi's contribution to love affairs in metaphorical terms:

An arch
cannot be built
without a substructure
for support
till it's strong enough
to stand on its own,
so love cannot germinate
without a go-between,
but when it has taken root
she's no longer needed.¹

In the realm of painting, the sakhi's role as mediator was often expressed by placing her near windows and doors. In a painting illustrated in Sivaramamurti's *Indian Painting* (Fig. 1)² the nayika, inside the palace, writes a message to her lover. The message-bearer, framed by the window, stands outside. To a viewer familiar with literary and visual representations of the nayika, the open, loosely-painted skies beyond the sakhi's head speak of a world outside the palace, a place for escape, of unwatched groves, late-night lovers' meetings, loosened hair and illicit embraces. Conventionally in Kangra paintings of lovers' trysts, it is into just such a landscape that the nayika flees, while lovers in contemporary court poetry embrace most often in the covering darkness of woods and overgrown fields. In a poem by Bihari, the confidante describes for the nayika the place assigned by her lover for their tryst:

The fields of hemp,
cotton and sugarcane
are bare
but do not lose heart,
the green arahar [tree]
still stands.³

Standing at windows or doors, the sakhi mediates between this world of freedom and the confinement of the court.

The movement between the court and the hills is dramatized in Kangra paintings by a stylistic division made between the landscape and the palace. In contrast to the organic forms, naturalistic detail and loosely painted skies which spread out in painting around the trysting nayika, the Kangra palace locks the heroine into a formal, bounded space which holds her away from her lover's reach. It enthrones or enshrines her in a kind of hieratic isolation that is reinforced in the painting by the placement of the nayika's attendants and by the attendants' activities.

MOLLY EMMA AITKEN

Spectatorship and Femininity in Kangra Style Painting

The female beauty in Indian painting, whether she is bathing, writing a love-letter, waking from a bad dream, fainting with passion or gazing in the mirror, is a compelling object of desire, cosseted and adored by her attendants. Late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century representations of a woman at her toilette, executed in the so-called Kangra style, employ an elaborate visual rhetoric to dramatize the superior beauty and charm of their heroines. Constructed like religious images and like scenes of rulers holding court, the paintings exalt and sanctify female beauty. The thematic structure of these paintings, articulated through the actions and gestures of the women's attendants, draws a relationship between the women pictured in the paintings and their viewers. This relationship, based on the viewer's gaze, puts the viewer in the position of the woman's lover and devotee. Within this relationship, different viewers would have responded differently to the heroine's appearance of sanctity. By conflating the spectator's gaze with that of the woman's admirer, Kangra images of women with their attendants examine the nature of looking, giving us an important insight into different modes of spectatorship in the Pahari courts as well as into the ways Kangra painters might have viewed their own art.

Structuring the male gaze

I begin my discussion by describing the internal structure of paintings which represent a beautiful woman with her attendants. In most north Indian court poetry, a triangular relationship exists between a man, woman and their go-between. Kangra painters often interpret this relationship by placing the woman at the centre of attention, making her attendants intermediaries and putting the painting's viewer in the position of the woman's lover.

The sakhi in Indian poetry is the beloved's female confidante. In poetry and painting the sakhi plays the go-between in the affair between her mistress, known as the nayika, and her mistress' lover, known as the nayaka. In her capacity as go-between, the sakhi mediates between the realms of the zenana and the outside world of men. The poet Keshava

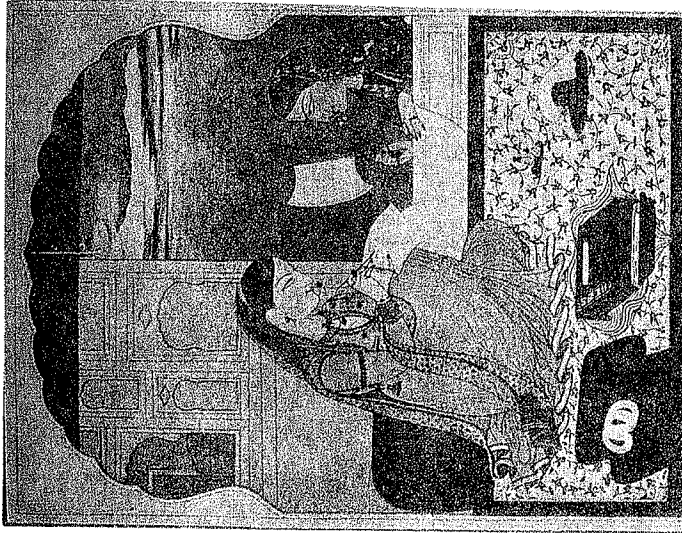


Fig. 1 Love Letter, Kangra, circa 1780 A.D.

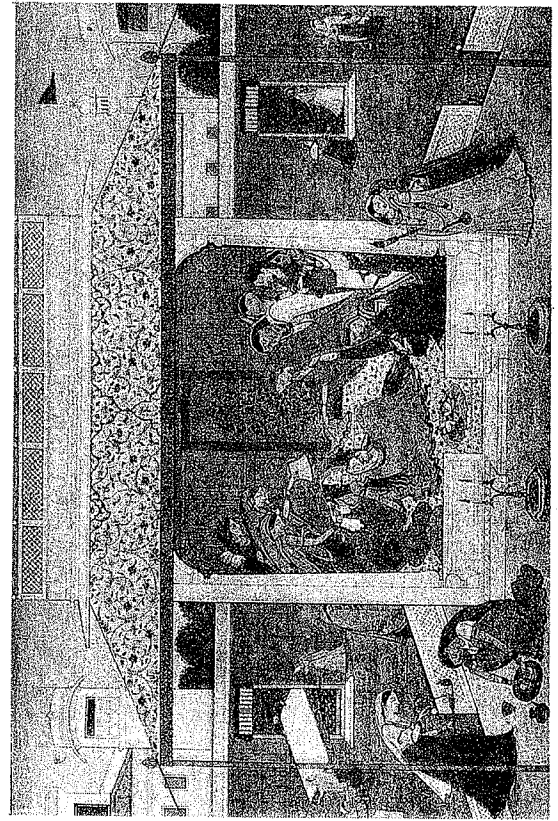


Fig. 3 Damayanti Consumed with Love, Pahari, mid-eighteenth century. (Collection: Dr. Karan Singh.)

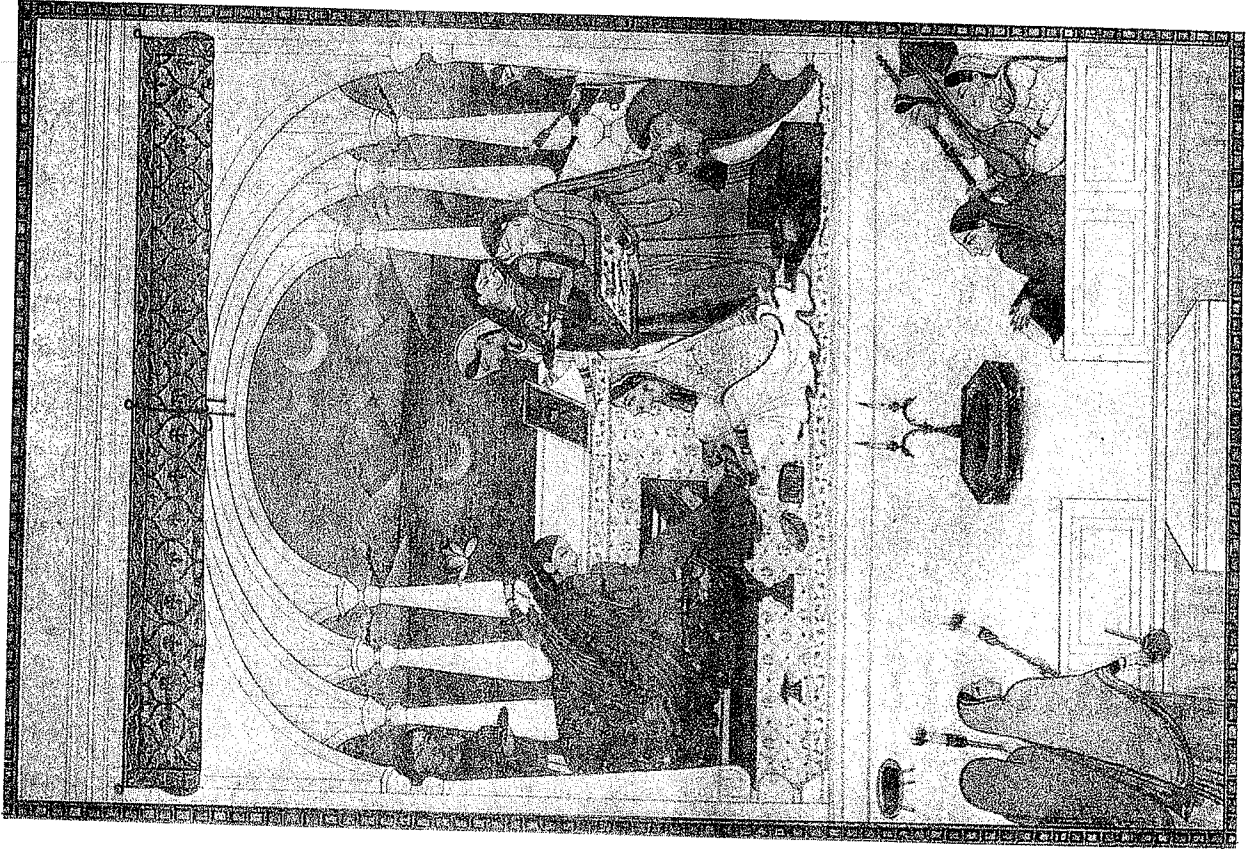


Fig. 2 Ornamenting the Heroine, Guler, circa 1780 A.D. (Collection: Dr. Karan Singh.)

Speaking for each of the absent lovers, listening to the couple's hopes and sighs, even commenting on the affair to a friend, the *sakhi* acts out in poetry the roles of both speaker/poet and listener/reader. In the painting just described (Fig. 1), she mediates between the lovers through the agency of a letter, conjuring up an image of the absent lover and a scenario of separation that are more fully developed in poetry. In the paintings I will examine in this essay—for the most part, images of the *nayika's* toilette—a group of female companions takes the place of the confidante to frame the *nayika*, set her apart, even unveil her for her lover's eye. The attendants play out a scenario unique to painting. Through their actions and gestures they mediate between the inside of the palace and the outside of the picture, where the eye of the lover and the eye of the painting's viewer become one. By gazing upon the *nayika* and displaying her to her male admirer, the *nayika's* attendants bring into the painting the function of the spectator as viewer and the function of the artist as exhibitor.

Frequently cut off by the frame of the picture, the *nayika's* attendants define a space that continues beyond the picture's edge. At the bottom of a painting from the Chandigarh Museum (Fig. 2), two women turn their backs to the viewer, duplicating his position in front of the image. With their feet outside the frame, they enact a movement into the represented scene from a region ambiguously shared by the picture and by the viewer's space outside the picture's edge. The spectator associates himself with them and their movement into the picture. At the same time he is distanced by the women, knowing himself to be behind them, still external to the frame.⁴

The mediating gestures of the *nayika's* attendants are reinforced by underlying architectural transitions which move the viewer's eye from his three-dimensional world into the painted space of the picture. The edge of a parapet, a railing, a step or an archway frequently appear at the edges of the frame to suggest that the picture extends beyond itself. In the above example, a step leads from a covered verandah to an area below which supports a group of musicians. Another set of steps leads from this level to a third area which disappears beyond the bottom of the picture. The top step rests on the edge of the painting, as though the partly hidden area below the frame were in fact part of the space outside the picture—the spectator's space. The two female attendants who approach the steps are shown to emerge from our world and to inaugurate a movement towards the inside and centre of the picture.

The gestures and positions of the *nayika's* attendants mark out an intermediate area between the real world of the spectator and the flat, rarefied environment which immediately surrounds the *nayika*. The *nayika's* companions appear to occupy three-dimensional space. Holding fans, waterpots or candles, rolling sandalwood or expressing surprise,

they turn and gesture, standing one in front of the other and moving naturally and variously like women in the real world. Unlike her companions, the *nayika* tends to sit apart so that no pillar, object or person interrupts our view of her. In images of Princess Damayanti (Fig. 3), the heroines stretch out horizontally, not a single limb hidden or foreshortened. The women around them barely touch their mistress, head and feet, while the space behind each princess remains conspicuously empty. In these and similar paintings, the *nayika* appears separate, posed, static and inviolate, the space around her, flat and unreal.

By flanking their mistress, serving her and gazing upon her, the *nayika's* attendants turn the young woman into an object to be attended reverentially. The structure of paintings which depict the *nayika* with her attendants repeats a formula commonly used in Rajput images of gods and kings, and in Mughal representations of the emperor. By standing to either side of a figure in a framed space, attendants emphasize the middle of the picture as a centre of attention and importance. In a representation of Raga Hindola at the National Museum, New Delhi⁵, Krishna's attendants gaze upon him from beyond the frame of the swing and offer him their services. The sides of the painting belong to the servants, the figures who look, while the centre belongs to the deity, whose sanctity is reinforced by their looking.

Mughal *darbar* scenes, particularly of Jahangir's period, provide an even closer precedent. The architectural surroundings of the *darbar* frequently open out as though to include the viewer's space, while the transition from the emperor to the viewer is often marked by a gradual loosening of gesture from the regimented rows of courtiers in profile to figures who turn, stare and chat at the edges of the picture. While he is drawn into the image by the figures who gesture, the viewer is held at a distance by the emperor whose rigid, flat and unreal profile commands awe and attention from onlookers. In the seventeenth century, the Mughal emperor's haloed profile was his official face, the face seen and represented as being seen, in the *jharoka* window. The daily ritual of *darshan*, by which the public was allowed to see the emperor in a palace window, deliberately echoed the Hindu ritual of *darshan*, by which an icon was seen in the temple at certain fixed times of the day.

This type of composition associates kings with gods and gods with kings. What is the function of such a composition when the *nayika* sits in the position of the ruler or deity?

Before addressing this question, I would like to examine images of the *nayika* at her toilette, images that sanctify the *nayika* more explicitly than all other representations of her with her attendants. They bring together a devotional with an erotic view of her beauty.

A maid scrubs lac from the *nayika's* feet in two typical representations of the young lady's toilette, one from the Chandigarh Museum (Fig. 4),

the other from the Kanoria collection (Fig. 5). In these paintings, the attendants behind the nayika hold up a white sheet to shield the young woman's nudity from prying male eyes. By repeating the lines of the picture's outer edges, the sheet functions as a smaller, internal frame which isolates the nayika from the larger space of the picture and displays her to the painting's viewer, framing her instead of concealing her. Emphatically delineating

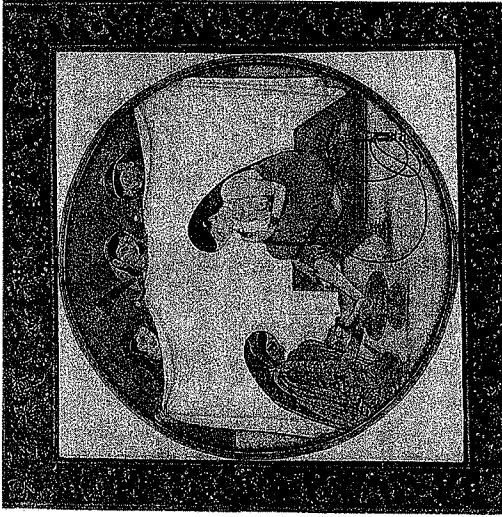


Fig. 4 Heroine's Toilette, Pahari, ascribed to a master of the first generation after Nainsukh, circa 1790-1800 A.D. (Chandigarh collection.)

the nayika as something to be looked at, the square of the cloth is like the outline of a shrine around an icon or like a picture within a picture.

The comparison between the nayika and a temple icon extends even to the circumstances in which the nayika is depicted. Images of the sheet and the toilette evoke Hindu religious practice. Rituals in homage to the deity include snana, literally the bathing, but also the adorning of the icon with sandalwood paste, fresh robes and flowers. This ritual preparation of the icon is echoed by images of the nayika's toilette where attendants bathe, dress and adorn their mistress.

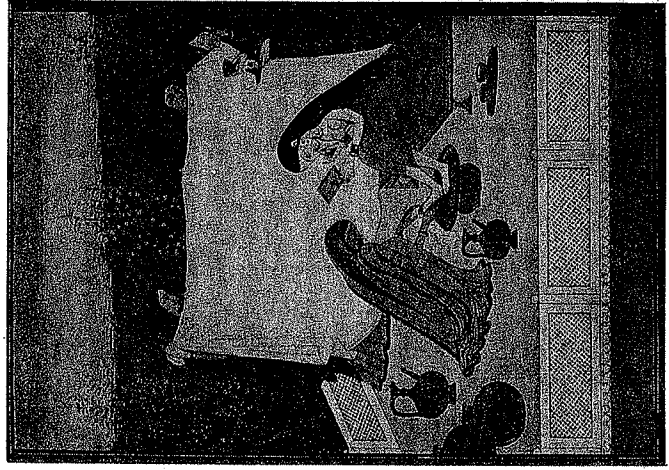


Fig. 5 Heroine's Toilette, Guler, 1785 A.D. (Collection of Vinod Krishna Kanoria, Patna.)

During the ritual of darshan, which literally means 'seeing', temple attendants unveil the icon for devotees. In the words of B.N. Goswamy, the ritual "implies the entry into the presence of a revered or important person or of a deity. It emphasizes the manifestation of God's grace through the mere sight of his image." The cloth which conceals and reveals the nayika's nude beauty serves like the curtain which temple attendants raise and lower for darshan to sanctify the object of sight. And like the outlines of a shrine which frame the temple deity, the sheet which frames the nayika transforms her into an object of veneration. Yet, of veneration by whom? Most obviously by men.

Whether visible or invisible, male eyes are everywhere implied in these paintings. Frequently, male faces actually appear in side windows or doors. In a painting from the Chandigarh collection (Fig. 6), an attendant holds up a cloth to protect the nayika from the man peering at her from an upper window. However, the sheet provides dubious protection since, though it conceals the nayika from her peeping Krishna, it reveals her to us, the viewers. The concealing sheet lets the viewer see what the lover longs to see, implicating the viewer in the lover's desire for the nayika. In this fashion, paintings like those reproduced in Figs. 4 and 5, though they do not represent the nayika, imply the presence of a male lover in the person of the viewer.

Held at an oblique angle, the sheet in Fig. 6 does not fully frame the nayika for the picture's viewer. The idea of a frame is not, however, lost on the viewer. The cloth displays the nayika to the external viewer who has a perfect view of her nude breasts, tantalizingly framed for him in the crook of her arm. Its dark, even, green surface dramatically offsets the nayika's head and torso for the picture's spectator. Like the frame-like squares of

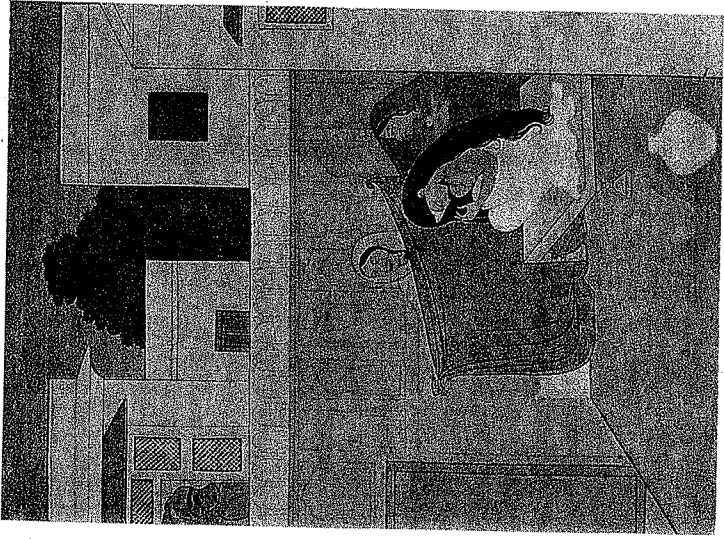


Fig. 6 Heroine Bathing. (Chandigarh collection.)

cloth described above, the two-dimensional backdrop emphasizes the flatness of the figure in front of it. Before the cloth, the nayika holds her head in profile, the flattest perspective. (The nayika appears in strict profile in virtually every painting where she is represented with her attendants. Only her attendants alternate their heads between profile and the more naturalistic and full-bodied three-quarters view.) While the nayika reveals both modelled breasts, her legs are turned entirely to one side, flattened like her flat white skirt, her unforeshortened arm, her profile and her flat black hair: her body is thus twisted perfectly to combine two-dimensionality with seductive exposure and a hint of graspable roundness.

That the cloth continues to function for the artist as a frame, even when it appears at an oblique angle, is made evident in a fourth image

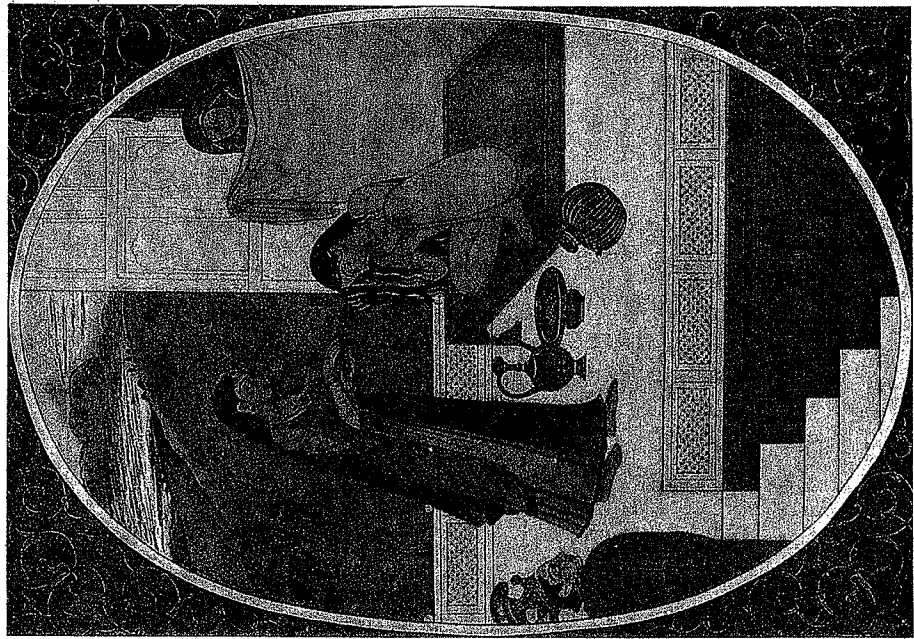


Fig. 7 Heroine Bathing, *Pahari*, circa 1780 A.D.

of the toilette (Fig. 7). The painting explicitly associates the viewer's with the lover's position by creating a transition between the outside and the inside of the picture. Krishna, the archetypal lover, mounts a set of stairs leading up to the nayika from the frame. His back is to the viewer and his lower body is cut off by the edge of the picture. Emerging from the viewer's space beyond the frame, he is the external spectator's double within the image. While the maid dutifully raises the concealing sheet, she positions it behind the nayika so that both the viewer and Krishna see her mistress in full view. However, the sheet frames the young woman most squarely for Krishna's eyes and it is he who has the direct view between her legs. Realizing this, the spectator forsakes his initial impression of intimacy for one of distance. Krishna is a step ahead of him in the suspenseful move towards fulfillment. For the viewer of these paintings, fulfillment remains forever suspended in fantasy—the nayika always sits apart. Framed from behind, she is represented as an image within an image, held tantalizingly beyond the spectator's reach.⁷

The movement in these paintings through naturalism towards an idealized, two-dimensional centre is used for thematic effects: to play accessibility against inaccessibility, nearness against distance. For all the clever transitions which draw the viewer from the outside to the inside and centre of the picture, the flat, posed nayika, removed from the people and things around her, eludes the viewer's grasp. Even in less strictly organized paintings which purport to show the nayika in a more natural pose, frequently a doorway, window or even the ropes of a swing frame her in a rarefied two-dimensionality which subtly removes her from the viewer's potential (albeit imagined) embrace. Here, flatness, which can be equated with the two-dimensionality of the painting surface, distances objects from the viewer, while naturalism brings them closer, associating them with the viewer's three-dimensional world. However, in paintings like the two just described above, the obliquely positioned sheet plays on the association between flatness and distance through an unexpected reversal: its naturalistic position in space privileges the internal spectator who alone sees it as a frame, transforming the nayika into an image for his, instead of the external viewer's, gaze.

It is important to note that it is not the woman but her beauty which is venerated in these paintings. A number of images show a maid holding a mirror to the nayika's face, while her companions decorate their mistress' limbs. Looking in the mirror, the nayika in these images becomes the object of her own gaze. In a Cleveland Museum painting (Fig. 8), she stares into a mirror which duplicates and frames her image. She is the object of several gazes—her own, her lover's (which is focused on her from a window above), and ours, for which her image is framed

successively by the cloth and the mirror. In such paintings which represent the nayika with the sheet and/or the mirror, female beauty, all but divorced from the woman herself, becomes no more than a mirage, belonging to an ideal realm glimpsed from the other side of an uncrossable frame.

The distance maintained between the nayika and her viewer is crucial to the construction of desire in these paintings. Desire depends on the distance between desirer and desired: the desirer can only want what he does not have. In a now familiar Lacanian formulation, the subject's experience of objects is mediated through language and culture, engendering an incessant desire for the 'real' world which exists beyond signification. The formal structures which at the same time draw the viewer towards, while holding him away from the nayika, set up the mechanics of desire as a pursuit of objects whose attainment is forever deferred. Constituting a visual language or rhetoric of the experience of beauty, these structures exalt the nayika while rendering her doubly inaccessible. First, they direct the viewer's desire at the nayika's physical appearance, confounding the woman with her own beauty and realizing that beauty as a surface—quintessentially, the image reflected in her mirror. The nayika's beauty exists only for the eye and at the distance necessary for the eye to apprehend her image in its gaze. To desire that beauty, consequently, is not to desire the real woman or even the woman's real femininity but to desire an insubstantiality comparable to the insubstantiality of an image in a mirror.

Second, if the nayika is constructed here as the sum of her beauty, her beauty, in these paintings, is also a construction. The nayika's face, hair, body look no different from the faces, hair and bodies of the women around her. It is only through those structures in the painting which appear to sanctify the nayika that the viewer can even perceive her physical superiority. Like the nayika's cosmetics, the nayika's presentation constitutes an elaborate masquerade which appears to make everything out of nothing. Within this masquerade, the nayika is no more than the sum of the attention elaborately drawn to her and the cosmetics elaborately adorning her.

My concept of "masquerade" is borrowed from Mary Ann Doane. "Masquerade," Doane writes, "constitutes an acknowledgment that it is femininity itself which is constructed as a mask—as the decorative layer which conceals a non-identity."⁸ Woman, according to this conception of masquerade, wears femininity in the form of jewels, clothing, attitudes. Developing the concept of the masquerade, Elizabeth Grosz writes that woman

strives to retain her position as the object of the other's desire through artifice, appearance, or dissimulation. . . . Ironically, in this aim of becoming . . . the object of the other's desire, she is revealed as the site of rupture,

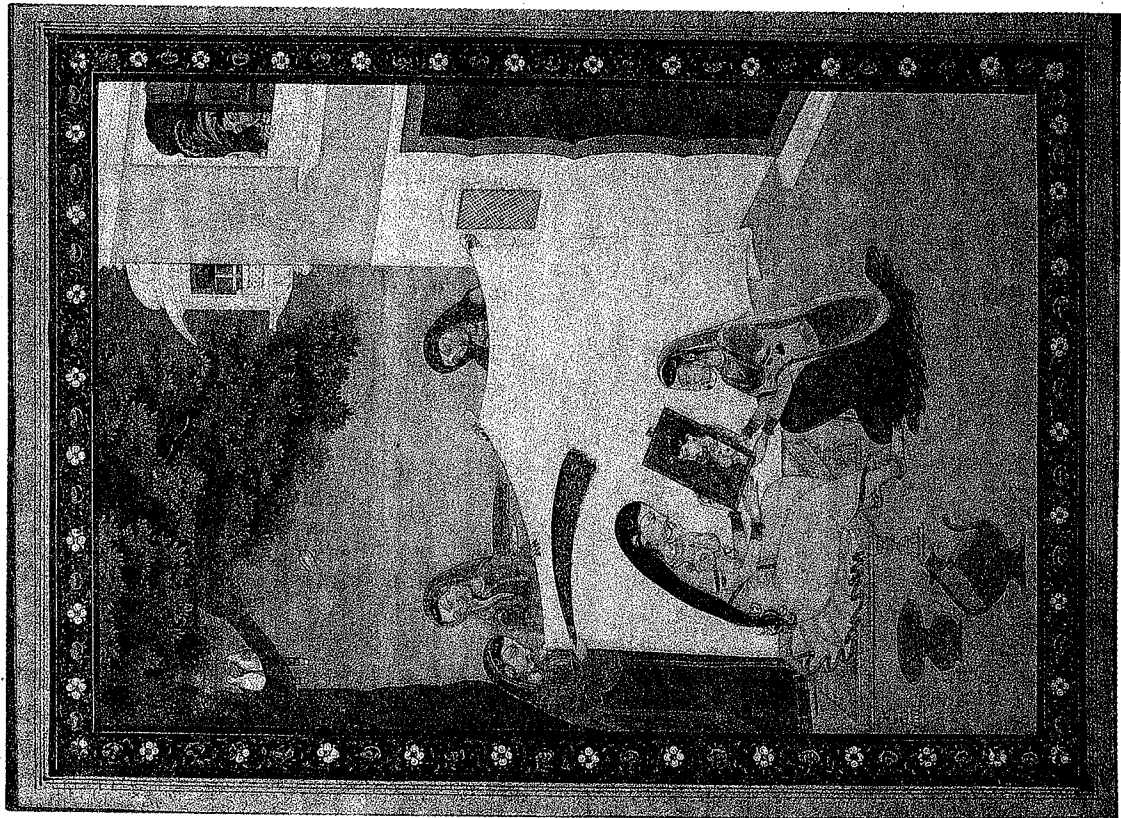


Fig. 8 A Glimpse of the Beloved. Kangra. (Photo: Cleveland Museum of Art.)

lack, or castration, both idealized and debased, bound up with the masquerade of femininity, the site of both excess and deficiency.⁹

Masquerade, in these formulations, conceals a lack behind its elaborate displays. At the same time, its excesses exert a power over the spectator's imagination. I have described religious resonances and formal structures which transform the nayika into a sort of icon for her viewer/admirer's veneration. I would like to substitute for "icon," the word "fetish," associated in a number of contexts with the concept of "masquerade". Hal Foster defines the fetish in more general terms "as an object endowed with a special force or independent life,"¹⁰ while Jann Matlock describes it "as an object that allows the believer to maintain a fantasy of presence even when all signs point to absence. The fetish," she continues, "magically procures illusions that nothing is amiss even when no power remains for belief."¹¹ While the icon refers beyond itself to an unrepresentable divinity, the fetish is self-sufficient, pretending to contain within it a power which it does not have. The term is appropriate for the nayika. By adorning her, displaying her, revering her, the nayika's attendants will the spectator to desire their mistress, imbuing her, through their emphatic gestures, with a "special force". However, beyond their exalting gestures, there is only an insubstantial image—nothing.

I do not want to overplay the concept of the "fetish" in my description of the nayika. Fetishism, in psychoanalytic and Marxian terms, arises from the attempt to deny an absence: an absence, on the one hand, of the mother's phallus and, on the other, of an object's inherent or objective value. My purpose in this paper is not to locate the nayika's masquerade in Freudian or Marxian formulations of the fetish. Because no one meaning can be attached to the nayika's fetishized image, I am interested in examining what it is that viewers desire when they look at the nayika. As we have seen, the exalted quality of the nayika's image depends on the formal structures which draw to her the viewer's desire: it is in these structures that the power of nayika images resides. With this in mind I want to look, above all, at the ways these structures of desire/power might have been variously used and experienced by artists and viewers at the Pahari courts.

Female spectatorship

Like the attendants who unveil the nayika in images of the toilette, the sakhi, in a poem by Bihari, intercedes for her mistress' admirers, imploring the nayika to show off her beauty.

O! O! dear girl
unveil yourself
so that men may feast their eyes
upon your face

whose beauty grieves the envious lilies
and puts the moon to shame!¹²

The themes of stolen glances, teasing concealment and illicit revelation were extremely potent for men in a court culture which strictly hid women inside the zenana. But what was the effect of these images on women? By explicitly addressing a male gaze, representations of the nayika with her attendants pose the problem of female spectatorship. There is evidence to suggest that women in the north Indian courts looked at paintings, possibly patronized artists, even painted. Assuming these paintings were looked at by women, how might female viewers have identified with the figures represented in nayika paintings? How might they have identified with the external spectator, the nayika or her attendants?

Organized around the relationship between the desiring gaze of the external spectator and the image of the nayika, these paintings underlined for women viewers the necessity of seeing female beauty with a male eye. The ability to suit herself to a male conception of femininity was critical for a woman's self-preservation and promotion in the north Indian zenana. By captivating the maharaja's attentions a woman could earn power in the court for herself and for her male family members, while taking power away from the king's other wives. Said one of the companions of the newly-wed wife to another:

The more her youthful splendour
blossoms out
taking on a new lustre,
the paler turn her jealous co-wives!¹³

Obscuring the dynamics of servitude, caste and political connections with the male world outside the zenana, nayika paintings show a superiority owed solely to beauty and charm. They suggest strategies for achieving position: cosmetic adornments, attractive poses, expressive attitudes which draw on the lover's desire and secure his protection. Structures of desire in nayika paintings thus elicit from female viewers in the court zenana a longing for beauty/power as well as beauty/sex.

Doane describes the excesses of the masquerade as a means by which women could draw a distance between themselves and their image, playing at but refusing to identify with the patriarchal conception of femininity.¹⁴ The representation of beauty in these paintings as an artifice built on cosmetics, adornment, the rhetorical gestures of a woman's attendants, suggests the extent to which beauty could be put on, wielded like a weapon in the fight for power. The paintings thus open up for women a place for intervention in the patriarchal construction of femininity even while appearing to depict them as the passive recipients/

objects of male desire. It is, however, a small and bounded place of intervention. Though female viewers may have tried on the male eye of the external spectator, they would have compared themselves with the nayika. Representations of the nayika with her attendants establish an ideal of physical beauty against which the female viewer would have learned to base her own sense of self-worth (mostly to her detriment).

She truly hath beauty and worth, while we are ugly and worthless. But say, should every one who is not like her have nothing but to die?¹⁵

Women viewers may also have identified with the nayika's attendants. For some women, the relationship between the attendants and their mistress, based in the paintings on the attendants' rapturous gazes, fond fannings, adornings and caresses, may have conjured up a world of women loving women—a world explicitly represented in north Indian painting and poetry. In Keshava Das' *Rasikapriya*, Radha's bosom companion says to her:

Your small hands place

Why so you on my bosom, friend? . . .

If you come me to caress

Then play the game as women long!¹⁶

Two women embrace in a Garhwal painting from the Archaeological Museum in Gwalior.¹⁷ Within the walls of the zenana, the women are absorbed in each other, oblivious to the man, Krishna, who peers at them from over a wall. The painting expresses the typical male spectator's mingled sense of exclusion and titillation at the sight of love between two women. While evoking an autonomous realm, sex among women, whether explicit or implied, ultimately becomes fodder for the voyeuristic male spectator, enhancing his excitement by creating a greater distance between himself and the object of his desire.

Narayana's nymph: the nayika and the claims of painting

Though the female viewer may find several places where her own interests and activities intersect with the themes of these paintings, images of the nayika with her attendants structure their compositions specifically for a male viewer's gaze. By creating a series of spatial discontinuities—between the outside and the inside of the picture, and then within the picture, between its peripheries and centre, the paintings set up a voyeuristic relationship to the subject. Fundamentally, they are about looking. At one level, already discussed at length, the male eye looks at the female's beauty with desire. To a courtier, desire for the nayika, enthroned in a formal structure identical to that which, in painting, enthrones a ruler or god, may have been conflated with the desire for power. He who wins the most beautiful woman, these

paintings suggest, enters the centre space, the space of power and veneration. However, evocations of sacred ritual and of regal divinity in images of the nayika with her attendants, imbue their structures of looking and longing with a variety of significances, and address different (less explicitly sexual) manifestations of the male viewer: the connoisseur (*rasika*), for example, and the painter.

Looking at these images, the connoisseur may have understood their religious resonances in the context of Indian aesthetic philosophy. Both devotional and aesthetic philosophies engaged similar structures of subject/object exchange. With *rasa* or aesthetic enjoyment there is the enjoyer and that which is enjoyed. With love, there is a lover and a beloved. With religion, a devotee and the object of devotion. The two extremes of duality must approach one another for consummation of the aesthetic experience, known as *rasa*.¹⁸

For many Krishna devotees, conceptualizing sexual union was the first step towards conceptualizing and thus achieving spiritual union. Worshipers of Lord Krishna often turned to Krishna's lover, Radha, to mediate their longing for union with God. Painters frequently portrayed the nayika and her lover as the divine Radha and Krishna, showing the lover with Krishna's blue skin, peacock crest and yellow robe. Though religious ideals were never wholly divorced from these paintings, representations of the nayika with her attendants point to a crucial difference in conceptions of sacred and profane desire. Distinguishing between the two kinds of union, Bhatta Nayaka writes:

while the mystical experience is a perfect fullness, in which the knots of "I" and "mine" are already completely undone, in the aesthetic experience the process of undoing has only just begun.¹⁹

Abhinavagupta argues in a similar vein that:

religious experience... marks the complete disappearance of all polarity ...In the aesthetic experience, however, the feelings and facts of everyday life, even if they are transfigured, are always present.²⁰

The worshipper anticipates union with the divine. However, in the images so far discussed, the male viewer's attraction to the nayika is founded on distance. A secular Radha, the nayika is set apart from the viewer and her attendants. Thus, the structure of these paintings reinforces the polarity between the viewer and the object of his sight. It is a polarity based on a desire for union. However, as prescribed by aesthetic theorists, the act of looking begins, but cannot complete the process of "undoing" this polarity. Consummation is withheld so that the viewer experiences desire and its object, the nayika, as ends in themselves.

Laura Mulvey has written that "fetishistic scopophilia builds up the physical object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself."²¹ The visual rhetoric of nayika paintings builds the nayika into an object for the

eye "satisfying in itself". The nayika exists solely to be looked at, while to-be-looked-at-ness itself becomes an attribute worthy of veneration. A fetishized image, the nayika perfectly suits the Indian aesthete's pursuit of sensual pleasure in which the material world, purged of religious meaning, may become the connoisseur or rasika's self-sufficient goal.

Exalted, yet empty of inherent meaning, the fetishized nayika's significance shifts with the shifting of her spectator's desires. To the lover, her image satisfies in the place of sexual consummation. To the female viewer, her image was a symbol of womanly perfection to be emulated. To the connoisseur, her image embodies the aesthetic experience and its structures of longing.

The connoisseur and the painter may have found still further significance in the figure of the nayika.²² A poet tries and fails to peel away the artistic rhetoric which has made women irresistible to him. He writes:

Truly the deer-marked moon is not like her face, nor are her eyes like a pair of lotuses, neither is her slender form made of gold—nevertheless even one knowing the truth, his mind thus misled by the poets, having considered that the body of the deer-eyed woman consists of skin, flesh and bone, serves and worships it.²³

The poem laments the false seductions of poetry in which the woman's flesh and blood are transformed into flights of poetic rhetoric. Though knowing her to be a false construction, the poet "worships" this construction, a construction which is neither the description of the woman nor the woman described, but the woman as description. In his essay, "Fetishism and Decadence," Charles Bernheimer suggests that desire in literature is often deviated from its object by literature's "decadent desire to fetishize itself."²⁴ The *Rasikapriya*, one of the most extensively illustrated poetic texts of the north Indian courts, is a treatise on poetry elaborated through categorizations of lovers and love situations. Focusing on the other appearances of the two lovers, the treatise all but equates physical beauty with the beauty of poetry. Describing the nayika more extensively than the nayaka, the treatise reflects a growing emphasis on the woman's physical beauty as the best subject from which to develop poetry's beauty. Women in the north Indian court poetry of poets like Bihari and Keshava Das only come alive to the senses in the form of a heady metaphor and hyperbole which fetishize the poem's exquisite language as potently as the woman's sublime appearance.

Mistaking
her crimson-streaked
coquettish eyes
for twilight
fishes regretfully hid
in the deep waters;

and, put to shame,
the water-lilies
closed up their petals!²⁵

Like the woman whose beauty in poetry is born from the brilliant language which describes her, the nayika in painting is the sum of the artist's visual rhetoric: her charms dissolve upon close examination into the emptiness of an image whose claims to perfection are derived solely from its elaborate framing. And what, ultimately, is framed? A beautiful woman is certainly evoked. However, set in direct contrast to the more natural gestures of her attendants, the brilliant artificiality of the nayika, the sinuous lines of her posturing figure, the flat, flowing black of her hair, the saturated colours of her lehanga and chunni, the perfect, stylized outline of her profile and the gold patterns which, burnished onto her clothes, cling to the surface of the painting celebrate the perfection of the painter's hand, brush, colour and design as much or more than the perfections of a real woman.

Richard Wollheim has described a problem created in paintings which draw in the outside viewer through his identification with an internal spectator—in our case, the sakti or the nayika's attendants.

Paintings that contain a spectator in the picture are potentially in deep trouble. They face a very real difficulty. . . . The difficulty comes from the fact that, once the spectator of the picture accepts the invitation to identify with the spectator of the picture, he loses sight of the marked surface. In the represented space, where he now vicariously stands, there is no marked surface. Accordingly, the task of the artist must be to recall the spectator to a sense of what he has temporarily lost. The spectator must be returned from imagination to perception. . . . Otherwise the distinctive resources of the medium will lie untapped.²⁶

In Kangra representations of the nayika with her attendants, the "marked surface" of the painted page is returned to the viewer's consciousness and appreciation by the figure of the nayika, the centre of his attention and the most crafted, image-like figure in the painting. It is not, thus, the woman whose beauty is revealed through painting so much as the beauty of the painting which is, ultimately, revealed through the medium of the woman.²⁷

The subject matter of many nayika paintings deepens the equation between the nayika's object-like beauty and the painting's beauty. By bathing and adorning their mistress, attendants act out the process of objectification—the movement from disarray to crafted perfection. Pahari painters portrayed the woman's toilette with untiring frequency. Perhaps they appreciated and were playing on the parallel that could be drawn between the beautiful woman being "made up" by her attendants and the beautiful painting being "made up" by the artist's hand. By this parallel, reverence and desire for the nayika's beauty was bound up with

reverence and desire for an artificial, crafted beauty, a kind of beauty exemplified by the painting itself.

The female face was often the most characteristic feature of the painting styles evolved in the various Rajput courts. Bani Tani, with her sharp profile and wildly uplifted eye and eyebrow, is the perfect expression of a face which is more quintessentially Kishangarh than it is female. The ideal Bundi woman with her slick, smoothed down hair and full, shadowed chin is the most eccentric, yet typical element of the mid-eighteenth century Bundi style. And the sweet delicacy of Kangra female faces is one of the most recognizable features of the Kangra style practiced at the Pahari courts in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. What is framed in the fetishizing structures which appear to ennoble the nayika is not only a perfect example of the artist's individual creation, but of the school of painting to which he belonged. These paintings exalt not just the beauty of woman, but the artist's rendition of Bundi beauty, Kishangarh beauty or Kangra beauty. To the politically minded spectator, regional artistic achievements, perhaps even political identities, were acclaimed as they were conflated with the fetishized figure of the nayika.

Notes

- ¹ Bihari, *The Satsai*, trans. by Krishna P. Bahadur (New Delhi: Penguin Books, India, 1990), p. 81.
- ² C. Sivaramamurti, *Indian Painting* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, India, 1970), plate 25.
- ³ Bihari, pp. 177-78.
- ⁴ Joseph Koerner's discussion of the Ruckenfingur in the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich includes a relevant description of the viewer's simultaneous identification with and sense of posteriority to figures inside the painting, who turn their backs to the viewer and look into the depicted scene. See Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape* (London: Reaktion Books, 1990).
- ⁵ Raga Hindola is just one example of an archetypal image. It is illustrated in M.S. Randhawa's *Kangra Ragamala Paintings*, (National Museum: New Delhi, 1971), plate VI, and can be interestingly compared in that book to the image of the nayika reproduced in Plate VIII.
- ⁶ B.N. Goswamy, "The Cult" in *Krishna: The Divine Lover. Myth and Legend Through Indian Art* (New Delhi: B.I. Publications, 1982), p. 124.
- ⁷ The nayika is not an entirely passive object of desire in the painting. M.S. Randhawa suggests that the painting illustrates the following verse: "The lotus-eyed Nayika sits arranging her hair after the bath; She peers at Krishna with gaze fixed between her finger and tresses." Interestingly, it is the nayika's physical appearance which is emphasized in both poem and painting, though the verse and the painting describe the nayika looking at her lover. See M.S. Randhawa, *Kangra Painting of the Bihari Satsai* (New Delhi: National Museum, 1966), p. 66.

- ⁸ Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade" in *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 25.
- ⁹ Elizabeth Grosz, "Lesbian Fetishism?" in *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, eds. Emily Apter and William Pietz (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), 111.
- ¹⁰ Hal Foster, "The Art of Fetishism" in *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, op. cit., p. 253.
- ¹¹ Jann Matlock, "Masquerading Women, Pathologized Men: Cross-dressing, Fetishism, and the Theory of Perversion, 1882-1935" in *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, op. cit., p. 58.
- ¹² Bihari, p. 227.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 225.
- ¹⁴ Doane, "Film and the Masquerade," pp. 25-26.
- ¹⁵ From the Sanskrit poet Amaru. Citation taken from Sushil Kumar De, *Treatment of Love in Sanskrit Literature* (Cosmo Publications: New Delhi, 1983), p. 23.
- ¹⁶ Keshava Das, *The Rasikapriya of Keshavadas*, trans. K.P. Bahadur (Motilal Banarsidas: Delhi, 1972), p. 74.
- ¹⁷ M.S. Randhawa, *Kangra Painting on Love* (National Museum: New Delhi, 1962), fig. 19.
- ¹⁸ Srivatsa Goswamy, "Radha: The Play and Perfection of Rasa," in *The Divine Consort: Radha and the Goddesses of India* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1956), pp. 75-76.
- ¹⁹ Raniero Gnoli, *The Aesthetic Experience According to Abhinavagupta* (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1956), xxxv.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, xxxix-xi.
- ²¹ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in *Art After Modernism: Re-thinking Representation*, Brian Willis, ed. (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), p. 368.
- ²² I do not want to suggest that a person looking at these paintings could fit only one category of spectatorship. As I have said, the female viewer could try on the male eye and the connoisseur and lover were bound to be brought together in the person of the educated male viewer.
- ²³ Cited by Lee Siegel, *Sacred and Profane Dimensions of Love in Indian Traditions as Exemplified in the Gitagovinda of Jayadeva* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 113.
- ²⁴ Charles Bernheimer, "Fetishism and Decadence: Salome's Severed Heads" in *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, op. cit., p. 74.
- ²⁵ Bihari, p. 227.
- ²⁶ Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 166.
- ²⁷ Elizabeth Cropper has described the synchodic relationship drawn in the Renaissance in Italy between the beauty of woman and the beauty of painting. See her essay "The Beauty of Woman: Problems in the Rhetoric of Renaissance Portraiture" in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Margaret W. Ferguson et. al. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 175-90.