



# A Critical Analysis of the Woman Figure in Mughal and Kangra Painting

<sup>1</sup>Manjeet Singh, <sup>2</sup>Dr. Rina Singh

<sup>1</sup> Research Scholar, Department of Visual Arts (Drawing and Painting), D.S.B.Campus, Kumaun University, Nainital, Uttarakhand, India

<sup>2</sup> Professor, Department of Visual Arts (Drawing and Painting), D.S.B.Campus, Kumaun University, Nainital, Uttarakhand, India

Email- <sup>1</sup>[mjsp271985@gmail.com](mailto:mjsp271985@gmail.com), <sup>2</sup>[reenasingh@gmail.com](mailto:reenasingh@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** *The use of woman figure has been an integral part of Indian art. It has given a lot to an artist to think, to create, and to depict as a subject of his creation. But the treatment of the woman as a subject in the art has always been affected by the ideology of its patrons. This difference in the depiction of woman figure is clearly seen in the two famous painting styles of Indian art history, named Mughal and Kangra miniature painting. The aristocratic and materialistic approach of the Mughal emperors, secularism, male dominance, gender and social inequality and the veil system restricted the depiction of woman figures with liberty and originality. In case of a bust portrait of any elite lady, the artist took help from a model woman figure with some stylisation. So that her identity can also be protected. During this period depiction of woman in the painting was based on materialistic purposes only. Comparatively, the woman figures in Kangra miniature paintings have been depicted with grace and dignity. The religious and spiritual ideology of Rajput kings offered ample opportunities for Kangra artists to magnify the Indian feminine beauty.*

**Keywords:** *Mughal, Kangra miniature painting, Woman figure, Veil system.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

The figure of a woman, either in the form of a sculpture or a painting, has been used in abundance in Indian art since ancient times. The world-famous statue named "Dancing Girl" found in Mohen-jo-daro, under the Indus Valley Civilisation, is an amazing example of the use of woman figure. The natural grace, rhythm and elegance of a female body have always inspired the artist to make a woman figure the subject of his artwork. This inspiration has been sustained through the entire chronology of Indian art history. The yakshi from Didarganj of the Mauryan period, natural and highly idealised figures of apsaras from Ajanta Caves of the Gupta period, the voluptuous figure of Chulakoka Yakshi from Bharhut Stupa, the bronze figure of Goddess Parvati from Chola Art, the figures of Surasundaris and apsaras from Khajuraho art, figures of empresses and the court ladies of Mughal art, the iconic figure of Bani-Thani of the Rajasthan school and the elegant nayikas of the Kangra school of miniature painting have remarkably established their position in the history of art. During all these above mentioned periods of Indian art history, these iconic woman figures have always been connected to some specific meanings, expressions, stories, mythologies, traditions, etc. And for this purpose, the artist has taken the help of the famous tenets of Indian art, i.e. Shadanga- the six limbs of Indian art. Among these six limbs, Bhava- the expression, has been used profoundly. Whether the figure has made in the form of a statue, a mural or a miniature painting on a two-dimensional surface, the gestures of a woman figure have always fascinated the world. And for the fulfilment of this purpose, the gestures have been accompanied by very precise and expressive postures of the body. As we go through these famous women figures, we find that they are expressing certain cultural, religious and socio-economic values and ideologies of that particular era and the patronage. This specific expression and the connection have also become their identity. With some similarities as well as differences, these women work in the form of the style of that particular era. With the blending of Persian and Indian styles of painting, a new painting style known as the Mughal style came into existence in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in India. It kept flourishing till the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The coming Mughal emperors could not carry on this legacy with such excellence. Due to unfavourable situations and intolerance of fanatic rulers, most of the master Hindu artists abandoned the Mughal court and took shelter

in the surrounding hilly areas. These artists created a very unique and beautiful style of miniature painting called the Pahari painting. Under the patronage of Raja Sansar Chand of Kangra, this Pahari style reached its zenith. Because these Pahari artists had worked under the Mughal empire for a long time, the Mughal style effect was very obvious to be seen in this Pahari style. Although both the miniature styles have used woman figures in their compositions, a huge difference is seen in their execution. This research study is going to critically analyse the depiction of women figures in two major styles of Indian Art, named the Mughal style and the Kangra style. And special focus has been kept on the facial expressions, social status, and purpose behind their inclusion in the compositions.

## 2. Literature Review and Analysis :

During the Jahangir period, woman figure became the fashion as a subject of painting. As the woman figure depicted in the Mughal painting has been a blend of Persian, European, and Indian features, its identity as a Mongol, European and Rajputani woman can be easily witnessed through their anatomy and costumes. The women have been shown as royal and common ladies with a background in the zenana or court, and doing daily life activities to earn a living. However, the Persian style had a major impact on Mughal painting; even then, the costumes depicted in the paintings are very close to the lifestyle prevailing during the time of Mughal and Rajput patrons. A lot of modifications and new things have been adopted from the European art, but it could never suppress the Indian traditional style fully. And the facial features of the women figures remained very close to their lineage, i.e. the Indian Western art. Where we see women figures having features like a small-sized mouth, a tapering nose, and elliptical eyes like an almond, long-tailed eyes stretched towards the ears, and a double chin. In Mughal painting, the woman figures have been depicted wearing a traditional dress, which includes the choli, payjama, and a transparent chunni covering their upper body. During this period, most of the women figures in the paintings were models, as there was no permission for male artists to set foot in the zenana. They were completely imaginary. Although there has been an association between the two sections of society, the Hindus and the muslims, most of the themes for the painting remained secular. An aristocratic effect of Mughal rule is easily seen in the paintings of this era (Lavanya, 2019). During the Mughal period, we see only very few manuscripts in which woman figures have depicted.

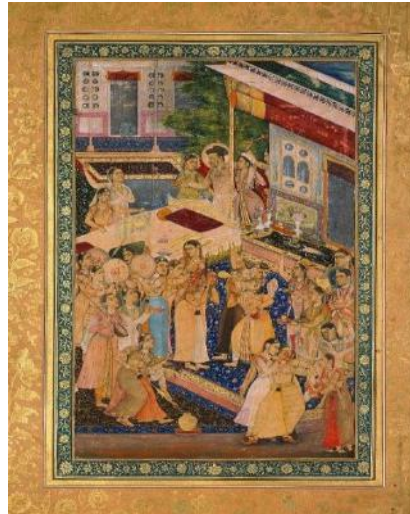


Fig.1 Jahangir Playing Holi, c1635.

Source: <https://www.theheritagelab.in/20-holi-pictures/>

Painting of this time has been mainly associated with the showcasing of the intricate details of different motifs used by the artist in his compositions. Irrespective of some sensuous theme-based paintings, due to the veil system, the portrayal of common women is uncommon in Mughal paintings. Women have been depicted in scenes related to any sensuous act. In comparison to Akbar's period, women were depicted mostly during the period of Jahangir. The women with very sharp features are seen in a painting entitled "Jahangir playing Holi". In Mughal paintings, female figures were depicted mainly for the erotic pleasure generated through their voluptuous body. And the traditional spiritual depiction of women as Goddesses or any other religious form has completely disappeared. The basic ideology behind this type of depiction of a female figure was the fulfilment of the individual desires of the emperor. The emperors were controlling and directing their artists according to their own individual tastes (Mandakini Sharma, 2016). By receiving inspiration from European art, the Mughal patrons and artists made use of female figures materially as a visual object. They used it as a

sensual model for the benefits in the court matters (Waraich, 2021). In the Mughal period, the figures of women are tall and shown in a standing position. They have long, joined eyebrows reaching toward their nose. They are having diamonds and pearls as jewellery in their ears. Covering the head was a social custom during this time. The woman figures are shown in profile face, with well-woven hair. They are wearing a short blouse, and for the lower part of the body, we see them wearing long trousers (Analojeh, 2019). The artists have been taking the help of portraiture to record and magnify the deeds of any famous or great personality. The full-length portrait in standing posture has been very common in India, but a half-length portrait came into fashion through the effect of European art on Mughal art. A number of such bust portraits of Nur Jahan have been made to commemorate and glorify her power and influence. In most of these portraits, she has been shown even without a Choli(Top). The ample amount of jewellery, mainly the various types of necklaces do not let her breasts be exposed fully (Women, 2026).

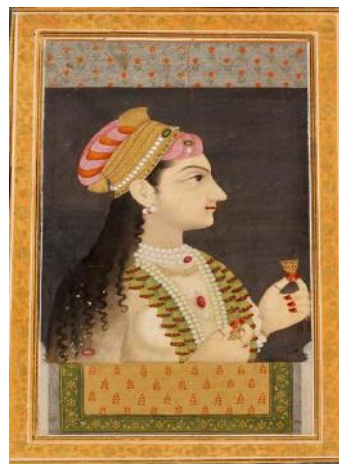


Fig.2 Portrait of a Lady (Noor Jahan), 1600s

Source: <https://harvardartmuseums.org/tour/557/slide/10237>

A bust portrait painting named “A Bejewelled Lady Holding a Wine Cup” was made during the reign of Muhammad Shah. In this painting, we see the idealisation of Mughal female beauty. The figure is wearing a beautiful tikka on her forehead. Thick and dark eyebrows, broad eyes, a pointed nose, a small-sized mouth and very fine lips, a round chin and little bit fatty jawline have been depicted in an idealised manner. In this painting, the beautiful woman is shown wearing a transparent veil (Chunni), covering her head and semi-nude breasts. This type of depiction introduces eroticism in these paintings (CUP, 2018).

In the Mughal social system the social treatment of women and their positioning in the society were strictly subject to their caste and family background. Mughal artists emphasized the physical beauty and sexual appeal of women through their depiction in the paintings (Zaidi, 2023).



Fig.3 A Bejewelled Lady Holding a Wine Cup, c1740-50.

Source: <https://aergallery.com/mughal-beauty>



Fig.4 Shah Jahan Honouring Prince Aurangzeb at his wedding. from Padshahnama

Source: <https://in.pinterest.com/pin/9148005521850630/>

The depiction of women figures in Mughal paintings creates a major contradiction in itself, as it was against the social norms to unveil women. The veil system was implemented mainly in the higher class of society. So the artist depicted the women of other classes with some generalisation and stylisation. And even in the depiction of any elite woman or court lady, this stylisation worked as the protector of her identity. In Padshahnama, the male figures have given their specific individuality and character, while the anatomy and the facial features of the female figures are just a repetition (Kumar, 2025).

Amidst the naturally beautiful hills of the North-Western part of India, Kangra emerged as a distinctive sub-school of the Pahari school of miniature painting (Srivastava, 2022). During the period of Raja Sansar Chand, the miniature painting of this school excelled so highly that all the sub-schools of Pahari Painting are being called by the name “Kangra Painting” or “Kangra Kalam”. With the help of Shringar Rasa, the Kangra artist depicted Radha-Krishna as the main characters of the story in the compositions. He made the beautiful compositions with the combination of motifs related to local social customs, nature, and religion. Alongwith many features of Kangra painting, the beautiful depiction of feminine beauty has made it popular worldwide. The softness and refinement of facial features magnify the beauty of female figures (Prasad, 2018). The unique expression of human love, romance, and eroticism makes the charm of these paintings exceptionally supernatural (Neog, 2020). The nayikas depicted in the Kangra miniature paintings are the visual expressions of the poem composed by a famous poet named Kesavadas. In his poem Rasikpriya, he beautifully combined human love with divine love, completely generating a spiritual effect. He has described the different forms of a woman based on her age, physical features, mindscape, experience, circumstances, emotions, sentiments, and moods. Alongwith many other types of nayikas, Kesavadas specially wrote about eight types of nayikas, collectively known as “Ashtanayikas”. These eight types are:

#### **Svadhinapatika:**

This type of nayika is that whose lover himself passionately bound in her love. This nayika (Radha) is depicted by the Kangra artist as seated on a chauki with pride and confidence while the lover (Krishna) washes her feet, massaging her legs, and applying henna also.



Fig.5 Nayak, washing Nayika’s feet. Ca. 1770

Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/thesandiegomuseumofartcollection/6125064826/>

**Utka:**

Utka is a type of nayika who is distressed due to the betrayal by her lover. Her lover could not make his meeting with her successful. Kangra artist has depicted her in a composition like standing alone on a leaf bed, sometimes embracing the tree trunk, love birds sitting together as a pair, a stream is flowing nearby, and the thunderbolt can be seen in the heavy black clouds.

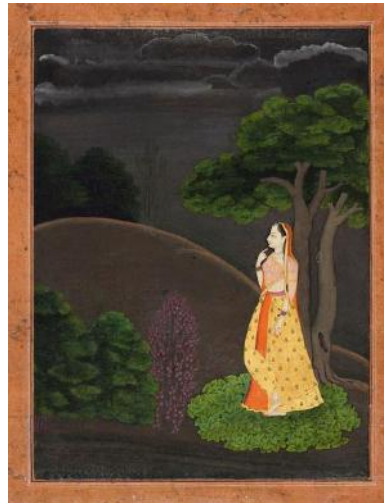


Fig.6 Utka Nayika, c.1750-1755

Source: <https://www.etsy.com/listing/799279083/indian-art-the-heroine-who-waits>

**Vasakasaya:**

This type of nayika is desirous and happy to meet her lover. The artist depicts her standing at the front door of the house and waiting for her lover with hidden excitement.

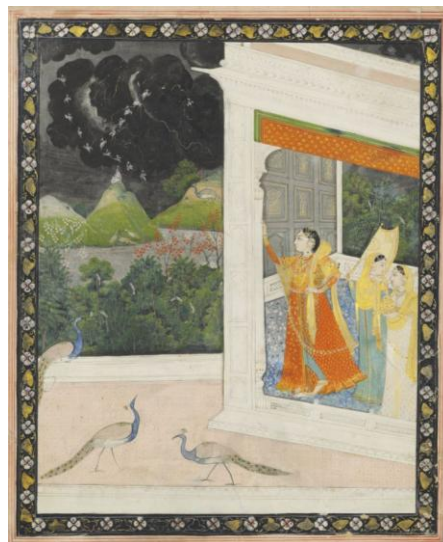


Fig.7 Vasakasaya Nayika, c.1810

Source: <https://in.pinterest.com/pin/465630048984075062/>

**Abhisandhita:**

Abhisandhita is the type of nayika who does not value her lover's emotions. She disregards his love. This nayika is depicted with sorrowful and gloomy facial expressions.

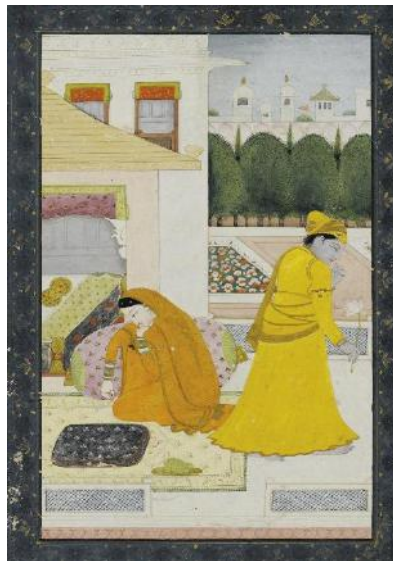


Fig.8 Abhisandhita Nayika, c.1800

Source: <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2013/regards-sur-orient-orientalistes-islamique-pf1319/lot.128.html>

#### **Khandita:**

This is a nayika whose lover could not make his arrival successful on said night. He betrayed her by his disloyal act as he met another girl. Kangra artist shows Khandita, with anger and insult on her face, scolding her lover as he comes in front of her.

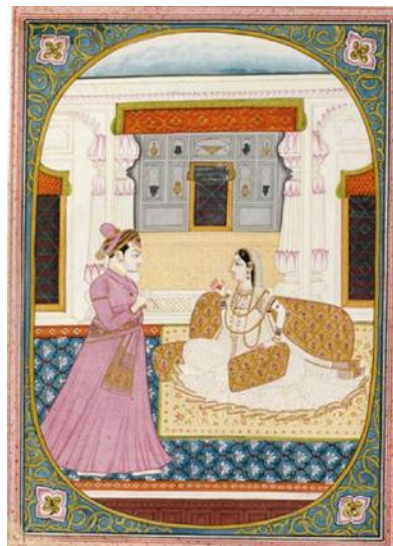


Fig.9 Khandita Nayika, ca. 1810-1820

Source: <https://www.theisc.in/post/ashtanayika-paintings-the-eight-heroines-composition-and-semiotic-analysis-by-omkar-pradhan>

#### **Prositapatika:**

Prositapatika is a nayika who is upset due to her loneliness. Her lover is away from her for some business purposes. Prositapatika is depicted in a composition including the motifs like, dark running clouds full of rain-water, flying couple of crane, and a peacock symbolising the absence of lover. Sometimes she is seen waiting for her lover.

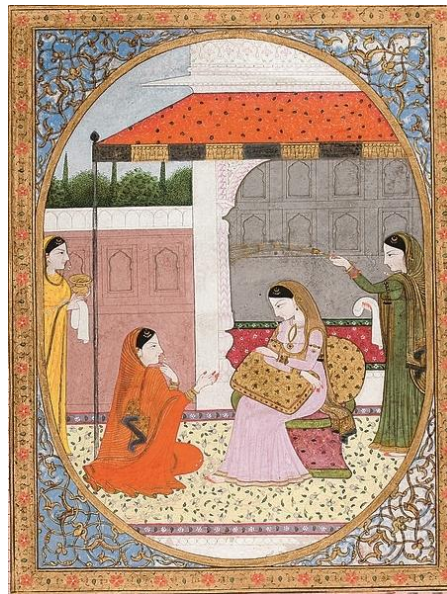


Fig.10 Proshitapatika Nayika, c.1820

Source: <https://byronsmuse.wordpress.com/2025/10/15/5-proshitapatika-nayika-love-longing-and-left-on-read-kangra-paintings-on-love-meet-modern-dating/>

**Vipralabdha:**

This is a type of nayika, who has waited for her lover whole night uselessly. She is depicted as standing alone under a tree in sadness, and taking off her jewellery in revulsion (RANDHAWA, Kangra valley Paintings, 2017).

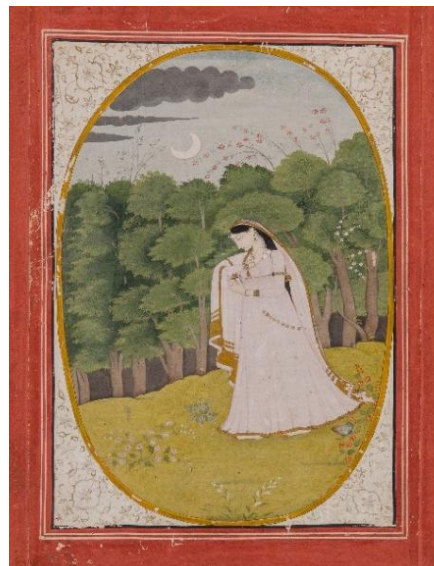


Fig.11 Vipralabdha Nayika, c.1800

Source: <https://www.bonhams.com/auction/21787/lot/131/an-illustration-from-a-nayika-series-vipralabdha-nayika-guler-circa-1800/>

**Abhisarika:**

Abhisarika is a type of nayika who goes out for the meeting with her lover. She is full of excitement, love, and desire (RANDHAWA, Kangra Paintings on Love, 1994).



Fig.12 Abhisarika Nayika, c.1790-80

Source: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/37992>

Love has been the main subject of the Kangra painting. And with the help of beauty, grace and rhythm, the artists have magnified this subject matter. Several expressions related to separation and reunion have been depicted in Kangra paintings. For the execution of these expressions in the compositions, the artist has involved living and non-living motifs like men, women, birds, animals, trees, creepers, plants, clouds, rain, thunderbolts, and specific colours. The women figures of Kangra painting are very impressive. Slim and tall figures, long and thin fingers, long arched eyebrows, round faces and beautiful eyes have helped the artist in the depiction of idealised Indian femininity (Sharma, 2002). In the Kangra miniature paintings, the artist depicts the women figures in different postures and gestures. He also correlates them with their social status and their local customs. But he always remains aware of the inclusion of local elements as motifs in his compositions. These miniature paintings are famous for the use of metaphor and symbolism. With the help of deep secret meanings, the artist gives life to these poetic images (Priya, 2022). Most of the compositions, based on the themes taken from the Gita Govinda, are metaphorical. Even the scenes in which Krishna indulged in romance with the gopis are connected to some specific spiritual knowledge. Here, allegorically, Krishna is shown as a spirit of the common man indulged in the pleasures of the materialistic world. And this wandering soul gets its real destination on returning to God, the real companion. This allegory is depicted in the form of Radha-Krishna's reunion (C., 1919).

### 3. Discussion:

This study shows that the depiction of the woman figures in the Mughal miniature paintings has been a matter of contradiction. The literature reveals that due to the veil system, no male artist was allowed to enter the zenana. So the artists have depicted only common or non-elite women. And with some stylisation, they used these figures as the model to depict a high-class or elite woman. The Mughal emperors were very fond of European art, and by taking inspiration from it, the Mughal artists used woman figures as a visual object for erotic pleasure and the financial benefits related to courtly matters. The traditional emotional and spiritual depiction of woman figures has completely disappeared. During this period woman figures were not given individual character like men. On the contrary, in the Kangra paintings, the woman figures have been depicted with a higher level of grace and concern. As Radha- Krishna and their love expressions have been the major subject matter of this style, the woman figures have been the equal counterpart in the compositions. The subject-matters, derived from the great Hindu scriptures, have been executed with great concern and deep spiritual knowledge. The figure of Radha has been metaphorically connected with the soul of a common man living in this materialistic world, which is trying to unite with God in the form of Krishna. They have also been portrayed in the form of lover and beloved in so many compositions, showing the emotional and physical conditions of the woman. Like the Mughal art, erotic compositions have also been depicted here in Kangra paintings, but the deep spiritual context attached to them makes these compositions comparatively more graceful and observable.

### 4. Conclusion:

The depiction of woman figures in Mughal and Kangra miniature paintings has been purely based upon the ideologies of their patrons. The secular approach of the Mughal emperor concentrated mainly on magnifying the heroic deeds of the emperors. For this very purpose, artists were ordered to depict the subjects related to luxuriers life of the emperor



and his individual interests. Moreover, the veil system, indicating the male-dominating social system, had strictly prohibited the liberal and genuine portrayal of woman figures in the paintings. The Kangra miniature painting, patronised by the Hindu Rajput kings, has been based on subjects related to religion and spirituality. These subjects offered equal treatment for the depiction of men and women in the composition. Unlike the Mughal miniature painting, the woman figures have been depicted with deep and genuine concern in the Kangra miniature painting. Even the Kangra miniature painting is an embodiment of woman's sentiments and beauty. This study will be helpful in understanding the status of women in ancient Indian culture and society. And it also leads a path to research about the changes and similarities in the social and cultural viewpoint towards the present-day woman.

#### References:

1. Analojeh, H. B. (2019). Comparative investigation of Two Paintings of the Women in the Safavid and Mughal Eras. *Journal of Biochemical Technology*, 69-76.
2. C., A. K. (1919). RAJPUT PAINTING. *Museum of Fine Arts Bulletin*, 37.
3. CUP, A. B. (2018). *A BEJEWELLED LADY HOLDING A WINE CUP*. Retrieved from AER: <https://aergallery.com/mughal-beauty>
4. Kumar, M. (2025). *Visibility, Veiling And Voyeurism : The Unique Depiction of Women in Mughal Painting*. Retrieved from MOJARTO: <https://blog.mojarto.com/visibility-veiling-and-voyeurism-the-unique-depiction-of-women-in-mughal-painting/>
5. Lavanya, D. B. (2019). GLIMPSES OF WOMEN IN MUGHAL MINIATURE PAINTINGS. *International Journal of Social Science and Economic Research*, 1663-1672.
6. Mandakini Sharma, I. G. (2016). From Caves to Miniatures: Portrayal of Woman in. *Chitrolekha International Magazine on Art and Design*.
7. Neog, N. (2020). Art Heritage and Law: Railroading Geographical Indications Act and Kangra Miniature Paintings. In G. v. Niraj Kumar, *Himalayan Bridge* (p. 9). Routledge.
8. Prasad, K. V. (2018). THE PROMINENT INDIAN PAINTING STYLES AND THEIR STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL. *INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH*, 149-169.
9. Priya, D. K. (2022). DEPICTION OF ABHISARIKA NAYIKA IN PAHARI MINIATURE PAINTINGS AND HER PICTORIAL VALUES . *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Educational Research*, 160-169.
10. RANDHAWA, M. S. (1994). *Kangra Paintings on Love*. New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India.
11. RANDHAWA, M. S. (2017). *Kangra valley Paintings*. New Delhi: Publications Division Ministry of Information & Broadcasting.
12. Sharma, L. C. (2002). *A Brief History of Indian Painting*. Meerut: KRISHNA PRAKASHAN MEDIA (P) LTD. 11, Shivaji Road, Meerut-250001 (U.P.) India.
13. Srivastava, D. S. (2022). Indian Miniature Paintings: An Incredible Cultural Heritage. *Journal of Archaeology and Anthropology*.
14. Waraich, S. (2021). Concealing and Revealing the Female Body in European Prints and Mughal Paintings. In H. Madar, *Prints as Agents of Global Exchange* (pp. 31-72). Routledge.
15. Women, P. o. (2026). *Portraiture of Mughal Royal Women*. Retrieved from Harvard Art Museums: <https://harvardartmuseums.org/tour/557/slide/10237>
16. Zaidi, M. A. (2023). Role of Women in the Mughal Empire. *International Journal for Research in Applied Science & Engineering Technology (IJRASET)*, 7497-7509.