

## **Colonial Impacts on Visual Culture: An Aesthetical Reading on the Selected Paintings of Raja Ravi Varma**

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Raja Ravi Varma was an Indian artist from the princely state of Travancore, Kerala. Ravi Varma achieves recognition for his depiction of scenes from the epics of the Mahabharata and Ramayana. The work of Raja Ravi Varma is considered to be among the best examples of the fusion of Indian traditions with the techniques of European academic art, in the colonial 19th century. Varma became the best known allegorist of Indian subject in his depiction of scenes from the Epic of Mahabharata and Ramayana.

Ravi Varma considered his work as “establishing a new civilizational identity within the terms of 19th century India”. He aimed to form an Indian canon of art in the manner of those of the classic Greek and Roman Civilization. Varma’s art came to play an important role in the development of Indian national consciousness. Varma purchased a printing press which churned out oleograph copies of his paintings which graced the middle-class homes of India, many decades after he died. He considered a genius in his heyday, within a few years of his passing; Varma’s paintings came under severe structures for mimicking western Art.

During the colonial era, western influences have started to make an impact on Indian Art. Some artists developed a style that used western ideas of composition, perspective and realism to illustrate Indian themes, Ravi Varma being prominent among them, the Bengal school arose as an avant-garde and nationalist movement reacting against the academic art styles previously promoted in India, both by Indian artists such as Varma and British art school.

The Ravi Varma Fine Arts Lithographic Press, which started production on the outskirts of Bombay in 1894 and the Calcutta Art Studio spread a specifically Hindu visual representation of national identity. Without the large scale reproduction of images configured and typified by Varma in the European neo-classical and academic styles, a refutation of this aesthetics by the Bengali neo-traditionalist would not have been possible. These commercial precursors to the Bengali neo-traditionalist, quasi-avant-garde movement that sought to reconfigure Indian aesthetic, modernity using pan-Asian aesthetics, are artifacts

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Oleography refers to the method of reproducing an oil painting in such a manner that the exact colors and brushstrokes textures as many litho-stones as there are colors and tones in a painting.Oleography was a comparatively new form of printing then, mastered by an English man, named George Boxter in 1835.It came in to commercial use by 1860, but was already an exhausted force by the end of the century in Europe. The idea of printing and distributing oleographs was given to Ravi Varma by Sir T.Madhava Rao, former Dewan of Travancore and later Baroda.In India, until Ravi Varma’s prints, oleography was used for gaudy “calendar art” and commodity packaging.Oleo is the Latin for oil, which helps to explain the word.The period of production of Ravi Varma’s oleographs coincided with the rise of Calcutta as a rapidly expanding urban center, both politically and culturally.

The oleograph of Lakshmi and Saraswati were done at a time of intense nationalist fervour.The two goddesses, Lakshmi and Saraswati painted much later in 1896 are iconic in their visualization.The religious texts and the oral tradition that formed the basis for these painting do not belong to any particular region of India as the entire country has always absorbed these goddesses in to their midst.Despite such identification, Ravi Varma could not have realized the extent to which his two images, given a new meaning through the medium of oil paint, were to endear themselves to the people of India.Similar to the other artists and writers Ravi Varma presented his Goddesses in his own manner and with a specific intention in mind.He was seeking to convey their pan-national identity at time when foreign rule was being questioned and dreams of a free nation where being voiced.The images they conveyed was of great importance and there for wished to project them in clothes appropriate for that image. Given the choice of making Lakshmi either seated or standing, he preferred to portray her standing on Lotus pedestal, poised on it rising above the elephants. It was an inspired stroke on his part.She clearly displayed the saree worn in a style rarely seen before. Her saree did not belong to any particular region ; nor was it associated forcefully with any special group of people.This was the style to go beyond regional borders with in the country subsuming cultural differences at a time that India was seeking its national identity this was very powerful message to send forth, replete with patriotic significance.

The combined use of Hindu sacraments and celebration of woman as ‘Shakti’ created an exteriorized the female as a devi,which was read ,viewed, and then understood as a site of power to be used against the British.He used the concept of the mother and transposed these signs upon a woman,Varma’s Durga as well as the indigenous forms of the Kalighat Kali’s and created a supposed secular image of the nation.

The European quest for ‘realism’ in the realm of painting manifested itself in colonial India as well. The method of oil painting and the various techniques employed –such as the elements of

perspective ,chiaroscuro,three-dimensionality and tactile illusionism-gradually witnessed a synthesis with the traditional art form of India,which heavily banked upon the classical and religious themes.The fusion of western techniques with india's traditional painting led to the creation of a new genre which later became the exemplar of a 'new model art'.

The pictorial model popularized by the Calcutta Art Studio , with its interplay of the 'realistic' and 'mythic',of 'high art' and popular iconography, received a new boost in the paucan paintings of Raja Ravi Varma.His self-education in European art techniques ,academic oil-painting and his mastery of realistic portraiture made him the epitome of the evolving 'modern' art in India. However, it is noteworthy that his Western education ran parallel to an indigenous and traditional and the modern,evident in Ravi Varma's mode of education, found expression in his paintings as well, which eventually led to the creation of an altogether new genre of mythological oil painting . Varma used Western figures as models for his mythological dramas. Varma drew heavily from the paintings of two French academic artists of his time, Boulanger and bouguereau .He used their nude figures of Venus and Psyche and their allegorical images of chastity and charity and then draped them in Indian costume.The derision of Varma's neo-classical European aesthetic and the subsequent questioning of the imports of British modernity was the turning point for a changed modernity based upon a robust,Yet flexible Indian conception of the modern. Varma used the notion of woman as Nation.

Raja Ravi Varma was the first Indian artist within the European academic realist and neo-classical aesthetic to paint Hindu mythological scenes and goddesses using the female to embody the nation. He articulated the changing nature of the female as goddess within his paintings and later in his reproduced images.

Between 1880-1945 in Mumbai and Kolkata a burgeoning visual culture mobilized images for anti-colonial nationalism in order to symbolically structure the nation. Images of women proliferated in private and public spaces whereby these images were used as a method to imagine a nation free of colonial rule. Crucial to this development were the reformulations of modernity based on an ambivalent combination of British and Indian vernacular(s) inclusive of social mores and its associated cultural production-high Victorian visual art and aesthetics. This change was intertwined with the beginnings of the nationalist movement(s),which drew from iconographical elements of Hinduism. Political movements in India including movements such as the Raja Ravi Varma Printing Press, The Calcutta Art Studio, and the Bengali neo-traditionalists were influenced painters to draw the images of woman for the construction of nation. The change in British and Indian cultural paradigms came to be reconfigured by male nationalists in order to imagine a modern Indian nation. Ideas of the Enlightenment such as liberty, self-governance, and individual rights seeped into the urban cosmopolitan loci of India. It was in these urban soon to be colonial, metropolises that reformist movements started, anti-colonial nationalism erupted ,

and the symbol of the woman became the contested site of modernity between the colonial government and the nationalist movement .

Varma's time was marked by the point at which the changing world of court painting in the south merged with new patterns of patronage, professionalism and commercial success in colonial India. It also marked the maturing and public emergence of the individual "artist" with the full new status associated with designation, distinguishing it clearly from those of 'court', 'company'; or bazaar pioneers (Thakurta, "Raja Ravi Varma").

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Many of the protagonists of his paintings are drawn from the classical canon of ancient epic texts, primarily the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the literature of Kalidasa. Consequently, representations of significant and popular episodes—such as the Shantanu-Satyavati one, which became significant for Devavrata's 'ultimate renunciation' in the Mahabharata; or the abduction of Sita by Raavana, the King of Lanka, that instigated Rama to declare war against Raavana in the Ramayana; or the deliberate pretension of picking a thorn on the part of Shakuntala to catch a glance of and attract the attention of her lover, King Dushanta—acquire a tone of topicality when viewed in relation to the text, from which it is derived. Even the presence of the swan messenger and Damayanti's pensive expression becomes an allusion to the 'Kavya' traditions (Thakurta 1990). Therefore, these images led to the unfolding of the mythological narrative itself. There was a sense of celebration of the authentic tradition and the glorious past of India.

The orientalist and nationalist demands discovered a new point of convergence in Varma's paintings (Pinney 1997). The need of British India to shed its colonial feathers through an assertion of a new independent 'Indian' identity transformed the subjects of his paintings into 'icons', representing the authentic cultural tradition of India. Consequently the mythical and religious strain of these paintings, by

exploiting elements of iconography, led to the construction of an 'ideal' image of womanhood.

While the choice of women as subjects in representational forms had been a dominant aspect of western visual culture, Varma gave them a mythical rendition and textured his 'Indian' flavor with these (Pinney 1997). In attempt to blend 'Indian' ethos with a primarily western conception, Varma incorporated an Indian code of costumes, gestures, actions and feelings. Therefore, we see Damayanti as an aristocratic, resplendently attired south Indian lady, posed against the marble columns and stairs of a stately mansion.

Ravi Varma was highly enamoured by the neoclassical representation of nude Venuses and Psyche and their allegorical images of chastity and purity. The elaborate 'Indian' costumes, the coy expressionism and guileless mannerisms of Draupadi, Damayanti and Shakuntala became a mode of transforming them into legendary 'Hindu D

Despite their divine rendition, women in Varma's paintings bear strong sensual characteristics. The sensuality of each character is marked by the 'fullness' of the body, evocative expressions, the relaxed and languid posture and the equally sensuous gestures of the protagonists. In some paintings, the direct or veiled exposure of certain body parts of the female protagonists intensify the erotic element of the paintings, as is evident in his depiction of Satyawati in her semi-nude form or when the 'plump' Subhadra wards off Arjuna's amorous advances.

Most of his paintings celebrate women as being representative of fertility in their role as a dutiful and faithful wife, or as the iconic 'mother-figure' providing nourishment—all culminating in the image construction of women as 'ideal bearers' of 'Indian' culture. As a result, the sensuous element in them was diluted and undercut by the very divine or 'idealistic' and 'domestic' rendering of the subject. As is evident in one of his paintings, where he depicts a mother breast-feeding her child or the one in which the mother is shown carrying her child and waiting for her husband. The stereotypical idea of rendering service to and belonging to the patriarch comes into play here.

Therefore, it allowed a controlled, sanctioned and legitimized form of voyeurism by the incorporation of the religious and mythological narrative, which finds its resonance in the European allegorical paintings in representations of Susana, Venus, and Danae.

This complex play of sexuality and asexuality, and the sensuous and the pious, inherent in Ravi Varma's paintings, lent an obvious ambiguity to the nature of the emotions the protagonists portrayed. However, this ambiguity had its echoes in the newly emerging bourgeois or middle-class ethic of nineteenth century India, which celebrated sexuality within the sacrosanct structure of marriage. Therefore, Shakuntala and Damayanti are shown to be lost in their 'reverie', reminiscing about their 'husbands'—Dushanta and Nala. The romantic and deeply erotic craving is, henceforth, contained within the sphere of

matrimony. Therefore, the images of women in Varma's painting fulfilled the multiple functions of seduction, passive self-display, romantic inspiration, or conjugal and maternal role models. However the agenda of nation-building was also associated with the female body in his *Tarini* (1890), the protagonist's sari traces out the map of India, which seems to envelop the country itself. Here, as Patricia Uberoi (1990) observes, Ravi Varma crystallizes putative Indian national identity in the feminine figure of *Tarini*

Therefore, the female body performed a dual function in Mr. Varma's paintings. On the one hand, it catered to the European demands of exploring an exotic culture gaining more recognition by the adaptation of a western technique. On the other hand it also fulfilled the nationalist demand by using the same tools to assert the identity of an emerging nation through iconography.

Varma's painting *A Galaxy Of Musicians* (1889) depicts a scene of eleven Indian women in a state of transition between tradition and modernity. The painting provides a smorgasbord of Indian female types: Tamil, Parsi, Anglo-Indian, Gujarathi, Keralite, others to make up the perfect "anthropological vignette" (Kapur 168). In this painting Indian women dressed in regional attire playing a variety of musical instruments popular in different parts of the country. This picture shows the variety existed in Indian culture there are different types of musical instruments from different parts of by women, dressed in their regional attire. In 1888 commissioned by Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad III of Baroda (1863-1939), Varma produced fourteen mythological paintings using as their source the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. Varma traveled throughout India to find models who enabled him to record the diverse ethnicities of India's women. Varma was able to imagine a community through his collection of Indian women types incorporating the various ethnicities of Indian cultures. The painting is an allegory of a nation in transition and a nation being imagined through the gendering of the nation as female. 'Lady playing *Swarabat*' is a famous painting by Raja Ravi Varma. The *Swarabat* is plucked string instrument of southern India. It has a body made of wood on which a skin is stretched. On top of this king, a bridge is placed up on which silk strings pass, which are plucked with a plectrum. It produces a timber similar to a bass rubab. Some personages who have played it have been Parameswara Bhagavathar, Baluswamy, Raja Swathi Thirunal, Veene Seshana, and Krishna Iyengar. They were inspired Ravi Varma to draw this picture.

In consequence, images of chromolithographed and oleographed goddesses were disseminated and found a way into the private and public spheres of India. This created visual spaces that undermined British rule but they also reaffirmed the patriarchal division of labor, investing women with more of a "spiritual" lord as men were "outside" and did not have time for worship. As Annapurna Garimella observes, "at this juncture, worshipping and tradition became interlocked with gender and art" (33). This was due to the new conditions brought on by colonialism. Chatterjee notes that men underwent a "whole

series of changes in their dress, food, habits, religious observances and social relations” and that “each of these capitulations now had to be “these capitulations” were seen as part of women” (colonialism 629) and thus “these capitulations” were seen as part of the purity of the goddesses Lakshmi and Durga.

The combined use of Hindu sacraments and celebration of woman as ‘Shakti’ created an exteriorized the female as a devi, which was read, viewed, and then understood as a site of power to be used against the British. Ravivarma’s representation of mythological characters has become a part of Indian imagination of the epics. He often modeled Hindu Goddesses on South Indian women, whom he considered beautiful. Ravi Varma is particularly noted for his paintings depicting episodes from the story of Dushyanta and Shakuntala, and Nala and Damayanti from the Mahabharata.

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