
Looking Through His Eyes: Women in Raja Ravi Varma's Paintings

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Abstract

Visual arts have played a role in portraying and analyzing socio-cultural traditions and roles since the ancient period. Several artists and painters have emerged in their own time periods with particular stylistics and themes. Raja Ravi Varma is arguably the most recognized painter in the Indian subcontinent. This research aims to study three of his paintings- *Fresh from Bath*, *There Come Papa*, and *Malabar Lady* to analyze his observation of contemporary Indian society, particularly that of women. It also aims to critique the portrayal of women compared to the socio-cultural reality of the period. Extending further, it analyses the reception of the paintings mentioned by critics to comprehend the current cultural understanding of them and how they have shaped society in particular. Raja Ravi Varma has been a monumental figure in the world of paintings, and a study of his selected works certainly works towards elevating the understanding of society and the role of women, who seem to occupy a major role among the themes that he employed.

Keywords: Culture, femininity, painting, social customs, women.

Introduction

"Art is not a mirror held up to reality
but a hammer with which to shape it."
— Bertolt Brecht

The famous quote of German playwright Bertolt Brecht is the point of creative involvement of art in the social sphere reflecting politics, ethics, and social conventions, mirroring them and simultaneously questioning traditional concepts through a more interdisciplinary cultural approach. Visual arts encompass a broad range of creative expressions that engage the sense of sight. The field includes

traditional forms of painting, drawing, and sculpture, as well as contemporary practices like digital art and installation. Visual arts often reflect cultural, emotional, and intellectual experiences, using color, form, and texture to convey ideas and evoke responses. From ancient cave paintings and the intricacies of classical painting to the contemporary and innovative approach of modern digital media, visual arts play a vital role in shaping and reflecting human experiences and perspectives. Visual arts in and as Indian painting is a rich and diverse tradition that spans thousands of years, showcasing a wide array of styles and techniques. From intricate miniatures of the Mughal and Rajput courts to vibrant and symbolic regional folk art of states like Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, among others, Indian painting is marked by its use of vivid colors, detailed patterns, and diverse themes. Traditional styles, such as Madhubani, Warli, Tanjore, and Pattachitra, often depict religious and mythological subjects and offer insights into cultural and spiritual themes, while contemporary Indian artists continue to explore new forms and themes, blending historical influences with modern sensibilities and traditional elements with contemporary approaches. This vibrant tapestry of visual expression reflects India's complex cultural heritage and artistic evolution.

However, the most intriguing enigma that any study of traditional Indian art has to seize is the one between the profusion of representation of female figures such as goddesses and the submissive status of women in contemporary society. The inspiration for this paper comes from a desire to examine such paradoxes in visual art and cultural criticism. Culture plays a significant role in the social development of a nation. It delineates a compilation of shared attitudes, ethics, aspirations, and customs. Culture and creativity are present in almost all economic, social, and other activities, and a country as diverse as India is represented by the multiplicity of its culture.

The Indian culture, often etiquette as a consolidation of various cultures, spans across the Indian subcontinent and has been persuaded and influenced by a history that is several thousand years old. The period from 17th-20th century in Indian history was an era of great turmoil in the politico-economic, socio-cultural, and religious domain that gave way to contesting ideologies and gender complexities in India. It delves into the development of engendered representation in art, with the emergence of aesthetic and sexual archetypes and stereotypes of women: goddesses, mothers, wives, nuns, semi-divine *yaks*, ogresses, and others. The period examined the nature of stereotypes that were constructed on the basis of gender roles rather than

on sex and how these were reflected by various attributes of the representation- nudity or its absence, ornamentation, gesture, direction of gaze, and context. The various art forms provided the basic platform for the discussions of these representations. This paper is a venture to explore the women figures in the paintings of Raja Ravi Varma (April 29, 1848–October 2, 1906), a celebrated Indian painter and artist who is considered one of the greatest painters in the history of Indian art for a number of aesthetic and broader social reasons and looks at the tradition of portraiture of Kerala women in his genre paintings. This paper attempts to locate gender and image representation at the center of both history and art and also studies and scrutinizes the concept of bodily agency, nudity, and women's social position, and the gender attributes associated with the women models and figures of the painter through few of his selected paintings- *Fresh from Bath*, *There comes papa* and *Malabar Lady*.

Also known as the father of modern Indian art, Raja Ravi Varma's paintings are the fusion of European academic techniques with Indian sensibilities. His paintings celebrated realism and primarily focused on details of the content, which included the play of light and shadows, adding depth by using perspective in his paintings. Rajan Luthra writes,

“—Suddenly, the folds of a sari fluttered, the hair coiled, and the eyes expressed a longing. With thicker strokes, the jewels that generously adorned his subjects shimmered in a perceived angle of light.” (Luthra, 2020)

His paintings are teeming with vitality—trees brimming with fruits and flowers, water sparkling in a spectrum of colors, and subjects that seem poised to blink or move at any moment. This marked a notable departure from the art styles of that era. Often hailed as the father of Indian calendar art, Raja Ravi Varma masterfully brought Hindu mythical characters to life. Previously, such figures were depicted in a flat manner, with deities identified only by their accessories. Through his embrace of modern realism, Varma gave these characters distinct, recognizable faces. His work vividly animated many captivating scenes from Hindu epics, imbuing them with rich color and emotion.

The most striking feature of Raja Ravi Varma's paintings is that his paintings were based on life models. He often chose people as his subjects, especially women who brushed into his canvas and portrayed their specific gendered roles. By intentionally creating models for depicting female figures on canvases, both nationally and regionally, he presented the feminine form as an ideal. Rupika Chawla,

art curator and author, in her book *Raja Ravi Varma: Painter of Colonial India*, writes:

"He underwent a process of conscious selection of themes, genre, and medium in the paintings he wished to make – the grand historical paintings of gods and heroes and portraits of the rich and powerful. He allowed Western influences to prevail when and where it suited him, and from which he knew he could derive the maximum advantage."
(Chawla, 2014)

By employing the techniques of realism, Ravi Varma provided a fresh perspective on female figures, portraying them in intimate household settings with a new level of visibility. "His specialty was realism at its peak – each costume and piece of jewelry looks the same [as the] original. The pearls, diamonds, the temple jewelry were all of that era. The furniture, building interiors, utensils, all were available at the time he did his paintings," says Kochi-based artist Bindhi Rajagopal. He, though, painted a great deal of paintings, but his paintings of women have ever been the talk of the era for the problematic nudity and the representation of stereotypical gender roles, bridging the criticism from traditional to contemporary vision.

Even though he was the one who brought the Indian gods and goddesses to every Indian household, not everyone admired his art. His daring pieces, which depicted sensuous women in sheer clothing, sparked controversy within traditional Indian society. Art historian Ratan Parimoo, in his research paper, argues that Ravi Varma was responsible for the "vulgarity" of popular art. His paintings like *Fresh from the Bath* have been one of the controversial ones, where he is charged with seduction and sensuality. Almona Bhatia, who thrives by selling Varma's prints and oleographs online, says,

"They are just wonderful: His Mohini, his Damyanti, his Shakuntala and so many others. He paints a woman as the seductress and temptress.

What more can one ask for? And these sell like hot cakes." (Dutt, 2002).

This is certainly a candid observation, especially considering the post-feminist era and the current times heavily influenced by market forces. However, a senior woman painter like Arpana Caur contradictorily argues,

"I have never liked the representation of women by Varma. It is too calendar-like. Women in his works are much like the ornaments they wear. They are either idealized or turned into objects of desire with their

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clinging wet saris. These are not down-to-earth women who work like you and me.” (Dutt, 2002).

This accusation of the shade of vulgarity and nudity seems to sound true when we look at the picture of the lady in the portrait *Fresh from Bath*, where a woman dripped in water stands with her half breast covered in her clinging wet sari and wet hair. The image appears quite seductive and has a sexual appeal, whereas a feminist could easily perceive it to be a commodification of women's figures. But to look into the undercover facts, the time period around which Varma painted these pictures was 18th and 19th century Kerala. The painter's life and era significantly influenced the portrayal of women in his work. He came from a feudal family in the small state of Kilmanoor, now part of Kerala. In South India, up to 1960, in Malabar areas, it was considered taboo and impropriety to cover the breasts. Until the end of the century, Malayali men and women, from *Namboodiris* to *Nayadis*, generally did not cover their upper bodies, with the sole exception being *Namboodiri* (Brahmin) women, who covered their breasts only when they went outside the house. It was, in fact, not the non-covering of the female breast, but the covering of it was obnoxious and was considered a violation of customs. Varma, in his art, intended to capture the real women of Kerala in their natural situation of life by capturing them as real, bare-breasted, and with a single piece of cloth that was their traditional way of dressing. These women were not supposed to be looked at as sexual objects. Instead, they represented the realities of 19th-century Kerala society. Meanwhile, the portrait of *Malabar Lady*, another painting of Ravi Varma, becomes real in the creation of realism constructed by the artistry world. It is the style and the technique used by the artist that puts them into the category of real. Ravi Varma's canvases evidently epitomize the conflicts of transformation from a very traditional society to that of a modern one in which sex has become a central concern.

Savithri Rajeevan writes,

“—In the process of sex becoming the truth of the subject and the subject as the locus of sexuality, the modern society of Kerala was transformed. This centrality of the sex is, of course, related to the occurrence of the shift in the political technology of bodies from that of caste to sex [and] the simultaneous effect of this process was the problematization of the feminine identity, in effect that of the female body.”

Though we cannot accuse Raja Ravi Varma of nudity, the question that remains unanswered is the status of women and the class of women he chose as his muse for

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the portrayal of sensation and sexual art. Swami Vivekananda described Kerala as a place overwhelmed by caste divisions. *Nadar* women, along with many non-Brahmin women, were not permitted to cover their bosoms as a marker of their lower social status. In 19th-century Travancore, the state enforced a strict caste hierarchy and code of conduct. Women were prohibited from carrying pots on their hips or wearing garments that covered their breasts. Displaying the chest was seen as a sign of respect from both men and women towards those of higher status. He has chosen his muse and models specifically from the lower class and not the upper class, problematizing the concept of his art as inspiration and instead solidifying the stereotypes.

The other painting taken into consideration for this paper is *There Comes Papa*. When studied closely, the gendered role associated with women and their identity as the 'Angel of the House' and 'the Nurturer' can be analyzed. The portrait depicts Raja Ravi Varma's daughter holding her daughter, HH Sethu Lakshmi Bayi, who became the queen of Travancore, India. This painting illustrates the scene where a lady is eagerly waiting for her husband to come back home. Looking at the portrait, the first idea that comes to a viewer's mind is that of a mother and her child, but the title itself suggests that it is the man of the house who has been given the centralized position in the painting, even in his absence. "Raja Ravi Varma's works embody the dominant cultural way of looking at women as passive or inferior to men; they don't do anything to critique the status quo" (Fernando, 2016), says Sharmistha Ray, artist and founder of Bellevue Salons, a platform for conversations.

The painting highlights the major conventional and stereotypical role of the woman, who is a mother and a wife. The firm grip of her hand around the child and the expression of trust on his mother at the child's face uncovers the deep bond between the two, but at the same time, their anxious look towards the gate waiting for the man of the house dominates over the female bonding and is also undermined by the title given to the painting. Apart from that, the presence of a dog may also be interpreted as the painter's intention to bring forth the idea of protection for women, where a woman in society needs to be protected, and so in the absence of the husband, it is the dog who serves the purpose. Studying this painting in stereotypical agenda in regard to the 19th century, however, does not shade away the beauty with which the painter has brought into it a light of inspiration. The portrayal of women in the conventional roles of a mother and a wife is well brought out beautifully in the sense of the nurturer.

Women, as mothers and wives, are nurtured not only by giving physical life to a child but also by nurturing those around them. She becomes a symbol of the extension of nature. Vidya Dehejia writes,

"—as far as the equation between women and nature is concerned, it is as much a feature of Western art as Indian art. Women as an extension of nature is a familiar trope whereby feminine fertility and motherhood are invoked in art." (Dehejia, 1997)

In Indian society, the association of women with nature and fertility has always been viewed positively. Fertility in India extends beyond its literal definition, encompassing notions of prosperity and auspiciousness. Consequently, the female figure is seen as embodying positive significance, a sentiment clearly reflected in the act of breastfeeding a child. This act of nurturing symbolizes love and purity, and nowhere and in no manner can it be seen or interpreted as something sexual. Dehejia, in her work, projects women as carriers of the meaning of perfect domesticity, male pleasures, and perfect building, and such a representation may, in fact, underline their subordinate status.

The last painting, *Malabar Lady*, however, is the symbol of inspiration bound by the conventions of an ideal woman. It is a painting of an aristocratic woman playing the *swarbat*, painted in a white silk saree with a golden border, laden with ornaments, and an expression of contentment, depicting the feature of an ideal woman. The artist intended to symbolize her as a representation of a divine figure, the beauty that turned out to be a muse not only for the artist but also for her own art's sake desire. Varma's female figures are typically adorned with elaborate jewelry and adhere to colonial stereotypes of Oriental femininity. The opulent costumes, intricate accessories, and luxurious settings are all crafted to create a distinctive allure. Gogi Saroj Pal, a painter who has extensively worked on the image of women, writes:

"Varma painted a certain class and mostly commissioned works. He belonged to another era, and two World Wars separated him from us. We make statements. He did not. But he was a skilled craftsman, and his eye for detail of the Indian skin, textiles, and jewelry is exceptional." (Dutt, 2002)

The picture portrayed in this canvas depicts the figure of the perfect angel of the house, which defines a woman with physical beauty along with her other talents like music. Music was one of the most important desirable qualities demanded by

Kerala women and was the means of categorizing one as desirable or not. Pran Neville, author of books like *The Nautch Girls of India* and *Beyond the Veil -Indian Women in the Raj*, writes, "His women, be they goddesses or village belles, are not true to life. They are what an ideal woman should be. And as far as the embellishment of women goes, he surpasses all artists in the East or the West." (Dutt, 2002).

The close study of the painting of Raja Ravi Varma in which he brings out the beauty of the woman figure in the form of her service to family, a muse, or an art inspirer, on which the female bodies appeared natural and real as life-like. However, these women were not the representation of life models taken from the situations of life. Ultimately, these were products of his imagination and artistry; his canvases depicted a visual world that diverged from both the social and aesthetic norms and the traditional, indigenous painting styles of Kerala. The realistic classical mode of representation of female bodies, which was consciously posed by Nair Lady in *There Comes Papa* and *Malabar Lady* created a stereotypical image of Malayali female models. He could, in a way, neutralize them as real through his methods and style, which was new to viewers. However, with the increase in the awareness of the materials, the styles, and the sense of depth, with perspective and its shades, he produced refined female bodies in Western neo-classic style on his portraits. The depiction of women as Nair or Malabar ladies represents the aristocratic class, portrayed in elegant attire that was not typical even for Nairs or other women in Kerala at that time. These portrayals served two main purposes: firstly, they distinguished the aristocratic class from ordinary women, and secondly, they introduced a new dress code that established and highlighted new customs and traditions. This, in turn, contributed to the creation of social hierarchies and class distinctions previously unseen in Kerala's social structure.

Varma's images have not only endured but have also flourished over the past century. His depiction of the "*Bharatiya Nari*" has significantly impacted theatre, cinema, television, and popular art such as posters and calendars. His portrayal of women has also shaped the work of several subsequent artists, including Dhurandar in Maharashtra, Hemendranath Mazumdar in Bengal, and G Thakur Singh in Punjab. These artists, in turn, have influenced many others, solidifying the Ravi Varma '*gharana*' in the art world. Despite criticism from his detractors, the images of women in Raja Ravi Varma's style remain pervasive and enduring, appearing everywhere from our *puja* rooms to *Ramlila* grounds, from the big screen to television, and from advertisement labels to seasonal greeting cards. Thus, this description of the medium

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of being a female body representative in the caste society of Kerala may reveal the imagination and creativity of Ravi Varma, which was and can be said is the result of his inspiration from the stereotypical function of women of different classes of society. Reading his painting thus from the place of merely a spectator may not unfold his underlying way of imagining the status of women and culture in 19th-century Kerala.

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