

Art Speaks History: A Study In Transitioning Ideas of Gender and Modernity in Raja Ravi Varma's Portraits

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Abstract: Raja Ravi Varma's artistic oeuvre has time and again led to questions on his portrayal of modernity through his art. The art of portraiture practiced and perfected by him as an autodidact was synchronous to the cultural transitions of the nineteenth century India under the pretext of colonial modernity. Ravi Varma's art, especially his portraits were undoubtedly 'modern', exhibiting a marked departure from the traditional conceptual affiliations of Indian art. Significant amount of research has already been done on the brand of modernity that Ravi Varma represents in his art work. In this paper, I intend to examine selected portraits of Ravi Varma to locate not just the representations of artistic modernity in his work, but also the subtle expressions of a social transitions in them. In other words, I intend to examine the historic modernity that accompanies the artistic modernity in the subject portrayals of Ravi- Varma's selected portraits. Since a bulk of the subjects of his portraits was women, such an inquiry entails engaging with the question of gender in these artworks, specifically within the context of the subjectivity and selfhood of the women he portrayed. How does Ravi Varma's diverse portrayal of women differ from the western notion of portraits and how does it negate or reinforce the project of modernity that he puts forth in his art works? I shall attempt to answer these questions through a close examination of Ravi Varma's selected portraits.

Keywords: Ravi Varma, portraits, modernity, women, social transition

INTRODUCTION

The visual history of the nineteenth century Indian art presents a peculiar conjuncture in the art history of India. The period, predominantly characterized by an emerging dialectic between colonialism and nascent nationalism produced art that mirrored not just the influence of the western canon but also conscious resistances against it. The project of colonial modernity and its import in to the oriental sensibilities of the Indian masses were executed, as far as art is concerned, through colonial perspectivalism- the "visual/cognitive pedagogy [that became] the ideological justification for the foundation of Government Art Schools in the mid-19th century." (Pinney, 114). This academic dissemination of art, according to Sir Richard Temple, was meant to improve the Indian taste and would help to "rectify some of their mental faults, to intensify their powers of observation and to make them understand analytically those glories of nature which they love so well." (32) Such a 'colonial visual project' represented by European academic naturalism, found its apogee in the works of Raja Ravi Varma, the celebrated painter, hailed to be the 'first modern Indian artist' and the "most amenable to the western genre of art historical evaluation." (Pinney, 116).

The uniqueness of Ravi Varma's art lies in its seamless blend of European style and Indian subjects. Ravi Varma adapted academic realism of the west to create

aesthetic codes that represent the 'Indianness' of his subjects taken from Indian literary classics, the Puranas and from different walks of contemporary life. Such an engagement with western canon triggered, not just a distinctive artistic oeuvre, but also a social scrutiny of the 'artist as an individual'. In this context Partha Mitter observes that,

The advent of academic art was accompanied by a social revolution in India. In contrast to the earlier humble positions of the court artists, the colonial artists enjoyed the elevated status of independent gentlemen, in part because they now hailed from the elite...and Ravi Varma was the first of the gentlemen artists nourished under the romantic image of the artist as an uncompromising individualist.(176)

Mittar's claim is, in fact, supported by popular biographical excerpts from Ravi Varma's life which have a mythical quality to them, arising out of the conscious portrayal of the artist as a Romantic hero who champions all odds to cement his artistic-genius. Hence, there is a conscious effort not just to represent but to create a particular public perception of the artist as an individual and more importantly as an image-maker which is a direct reflection of the importance attached to artists in the 19th century society. One such partial myth attached to his artistic persona is that of Ravi Varma being an autodidact. While it is true that despite being represented as the poster boy of academic art, Ravi Varma never received any conventional training from an Art school; it would, however, be false to say that he did not receive any kind of training at all. Ravi Varma had received a mixture of traditional instruction as well as training in 'modern' forms of painting during different stages of life. However, his popularity lies in his unique ability to create refreshing art by mixing and borrowing liberally.

One of the most crucial questions to be investigated regarding Ravi Varma as an artist to investigate what compromises the 'modernity' of the first truly 'modern artist' of India. While it is well known that Ravi Varma's adherence to the Western canon and academic realism is what gathers him the acceptance and praise of the Western audience, it is necessary to enquire deep in to the concept of modernity that is often said and written in conjunction to his art work. G. Arunima argues that " [Ravi Varma's] modernity is not a product of a 'critique' but of a different negotiation with both tradition and the 'West'. His work is uniquely positioned as it does not emerge out of a kind of critique of tradition or indeed the West, which is true for artists of a later period. Yet it was modern in form." (59) Ravi Varma hence, settled for a collaborative effort of the tradition and the west, thus depicting the Indianness of his subjects in artistic styles sanctioned by the West. One of the most crucial aspects that forms part of the modernity of his artistic oeuvre is the industrialization of art that Ravi Varma initiated through Ravi Varma Press and its affordable chromolithographs. Moreover, Ravi Varma predominantly engaged himself with portraits, which is essentially a 'modern' form of visual art that raises a set of questions regarding the self-hood and subjectivity of the subject being portrayed. Ravi Varma addressed these questions within his capacity as an artist, from an Indian perspective. In this regard Arunima argues that "The problem of modernity within Indian cultural history is intrinsically linked to the issue of reality. Be it in art or in literature, we find nineteenth century artists grappling with the problem of representing the world around them" (58) We witness this issue of representation of reality in Ravi Varma's artistic work too. This paper intends to analyze how Ravi Varma's portraits engages in the

portrayal of the historic modernity that shaped his age, through the portrayal of his own artistic modernity.

The first to be considered in such a context is the family portrait of Kizhakke Palatt Krishnamenon and family, commissioned in 1870. As one of Ravi Varma's earliest works, the portrait is painted mostly in a flat, two-dimensional style with only a subtle mix of illusionism. Representing an elite class of contemporary Kerala, the portrait presents a family of five, dressed in *kasavu mundu** and wearing *thoda*, *kaashumaala*, *naagapadathaali*- all indigenously designed ornaments widely worn in Kerala by the elite. The dress and the ornaments are predominantly visual cues of well being, indicating aristocratic status and power. In fact Krishnan Menon was a sub-judge in Calicut Court, located in a province in North Kerala and belonged to a wealthy feudal Nair family*. The use of props in the portrait- for instance the fruits in the hands of the two younger children in the front, and the jasmine flower in the little girl's hand- is a characteristic technique used in European portraits. However Ravi Varma gave this imported technique a local twist as all the props used are very much indigenous to Kerala including the bananas clutched by the boy, suspected to be of *puvan* variety, found only in Kerala.

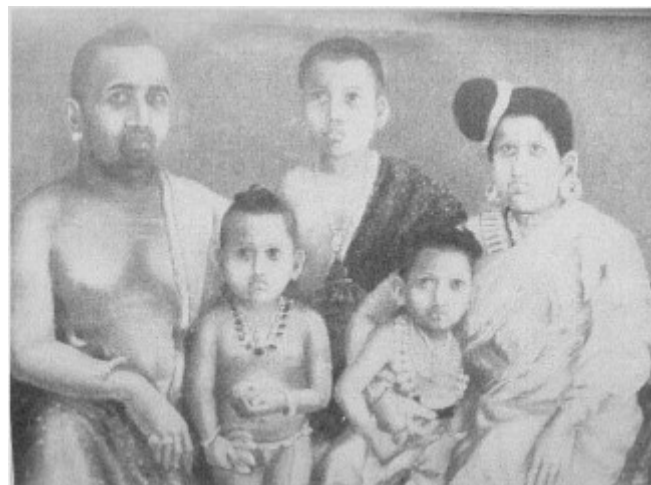


Fig.1 Kizhakkeppat Krishnan Menon and Family

Apart from the uniqueness in style, the portrait is also of historic importance, as G. Arumina points out that “Krishnan Menon’s family appears to symbolize the long history of bourgeois domesticity” (60). The intriguing fact about the portrait is that it represents a patrilocal nuclear family, painted at a time when matriliney was the prevalent social order of the Nair’s , the caste to which Krishnan Menon belonged to. For a system that traces ancestry through female members of the family, matriliney valued conjugal relationships mainly for the production of heirs. In fact the female members of the Nair families lived in their maternal home, the *tharavadu* even after marriage and co-habitation with their spouses was only occasional. Hence the portrait, painted more in resemblance of a western of a western, patrilocal bourgeois family was completely unprecedented in the social set up of 19th century Kerala. The portrait can be read as part of a changing sensibility of the Kerala elite, whose exposure colonial modernity and western education slowly percolated their own understanding

of systems of descent. Krishnan Menon's family portrait can, in fact, be treated as a prelude to the social changes that was about to affect the matrilineal system of descent in Kerala owing to the influence of colonial modernity.



Fig. 2 There Comes Papa!

The next portrait in consideration is *There comes Papa!*, which is yet again a family portrait of Ravi Varma's own daughter, Mahaprabha, and her infant son. G.Arunima dubs this painting to be a "clarion call for the end of matriliney"(1) as it betrays the growing patrilineal sensibilities of the artist, who is essentially the product of a matrilineal community. The painting includes a young Nair lady, believed to be the artists' daughter, who is dressed in traditional Malayali attire complete with *Kasavu mundu* traditional ornaments and jasmine flowers adorning her hair, perhaps, to visit a nearby temple. She holds her infant son in one hand, supporting him on her waist. A dog, with predominantly European features is seated behind them. The western influence in Ravi-Varma's style is evident here as the dog is a recurring symbol of domesticity in European portraiture. Unlike Krishnan Menon's Family portrait, this painting gives emphasis to the thematic element it represents. . The mother points her finger to a point outside the portrait, drawing the infant's attention. The gaze of the dog and the infant is fixed on the particular spot that she points to. The title of the painting reveals that the trio is expecting the father of the child to join them. Arunima argues that

The existence of the threesome in the portrait is predicated on the absent, yet approaching father. Unlike his other family portraits, there is both an increasing Europeanization and standardization in this work. The flesh tones are becoming lighter, the body curves not unlike those of vestal virgins found in eighteenth century French allegorical portraiture. (63)

The historic and social importance of the portrait is predicated upon the absentee father in this picture. As mentioned earlier, the family as a conjugal unit was unheard of, within the matrilineal system of which the artist was also a part of. However Ravi Varma here chose to celebrate two ideals that the 19th century Kerala society had seen only among their colonial overlords- the nuclear family and domesticity. It is also

interesting to note that the title plays a very decisive role in the viewer's perception of the painting, as without it, we would be unable to comprehend the playful expectancy in the portrait. The portrait in a way presupposes the gradual end of matriliney which was originally achieved through legislative efforts of the colonial state and post-independence Kerala Government.



Fig. 3 The Reclining Nair Lady

The third and final portrait to be considered here is called the *Reclining Nair Lady* (undated). The painting depicts two women, one of them a Nair lady, evident from her traditional costume, hairdo and ornaments, and the other a maid/servant, evident from her positioning in the frame. The concept of 'Reclining Woman' was a recurrent theme in European Renaissance paintings. In fact Ravi Varma's *Reclining Nair Lady* bears close resemblance to Edouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863). The similarities of skin colour of the maids and their positioning in both the paintings suggests that Varma's painting was indeed influenced by Manet's *Olympia*. Ravi Varma's Nair lady reclines in a horizontal position, with an open book in front of her which suggests that she has received modern education. The book is also indicative of the progress in women's life during societal transformation of the 19th century. The book coupled with the musical instrument beneath her, which resembles a *veena* suggests that she is well-versed in arts and literature of her time. One significant aspect of this painting which sets it apart from Ravi Varma's other portrayals of Nair women is that in this portrait, the lady wears a blouse. The use of blouses by aristocratic women to cover the upper body was a development that came about as a result of the spread of English education among the Nair elite. Even in Ravi Varma's other paintings like *Nair Lady Adorning her Hair*. (1873) or *There Comes Papa!*, the woman does not wear a blouse. The use of this garment serves an important purpose in this portrait. First, it shows the effect of English education and colonial modernity on the Nair aristocracy. The viewer can easily perceive a slowly changing consciousness of the Malayali aristocracy which was increasingly imbibing western ways. The young Nair Lady is thus the portrayal of Ravi Varma's idea of a modern, educated, western-influenced woman. As a contrast, the maid does not wear a blouse, which emphasizes the socio-cultural differences between the two women. The caste-difference between the two women, evident from their postures, ornaments, draping style of the garment, hairdo etc is also reflective of the social inequalities generated by caste in Ravi Varma's

society. Thus the painting not only predicates the stylistic modernity of the artist, but also the modernity in its historic sense, represented by the subject of the painting.

Ravi Varma's artistic genius expresses itself not only in detailed portrayals of his subject matter but also in incorporating the visual representations of history-in-making in to his works of arts. As a detailed exploration of his portraits would reveal, Raja Ravi Varma's engagements with colonial modernity was constantly backed by his deep ties with his own tradition . hence in his representations, we often see the evidences of a transitional societies that tells us of contemporary realities. It would not be wrong to say that Ravi Varma's artistic modernity was aided by his representations of complex, yet emerging historical modernities.

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